

Chapter 341: Rightful Heir and Usurper

As Argrave looked at Orion, who sat rather unassumingly on the edge of his bed, he wondered if he'd chosen the timing wrong. Perhaps he'd have been better served delivering the bad news to this infamously temperamental prince if he had still been beaten half to death by a Shadowlander. At the very least, Galamon might be able to go toe-to-toe with him while everyone else escaped.

No, Argrave reasoned. A lot of stuff has happened. I need to distract him by bringing it up, and hopefully he'll forget all about my possession of his brother's body until I can make sure this is done diplomatically. Even as Argrave thought it, he thought it was a bit absurd—was possession of another's body something so easily forgotten?

"You should know... we killed the Shadowlander," Argrave began before Orion could interrogate. "It killed a great many, sadly, but it's gone now."

"The dead... it is a sad thing," the bearded prince said, "But I've waited many months for this day, and there is gold in the mud," he declared. "My head is clear of interfering voices. All of Vasquer's bindings have been broken."

Argrave rubbed his hands together, eyes moving in cautious assessment. Orion didn't seem to despise him. He grabbed a chair in the corner of the room and pulled it up, then asked slowly, "Elenore already saw Vasquer... but the voices being gone—is that true?"

Orion nodded steadily. "Traugott's actions summoned that foul giant of shadow, but simultaneously dispelled the whispering voices from my mind like a lantern might ward away darkness. Now... their silence buoys my calm."

Argrave brightened almost inadvertently. Before he could speak, Anneliese asked, "It was Traugott that caused this, directly? You're certain?"

"I am certain. I tried to chase after his flesh when he fled inside that shadow of his, and as consequence... that *thing* bubbled free," Orion bitterly spat, clenching his hands against the bedframe. "But it did benefit me. Vasquer's false gods... they trouble me no longer, yet I retain their false divinity. It astounds."

Anneliese placed one hand against her chin, mulling his words.

Feeling he should continue to divert away from himself, Argrave said, "I think you should know something. Georgina and Duke Rovostar snuck into the palace during the chaos. They were trying to free Felipe."

Orion stood. "What?"

"Levin stopped them. He... tackled Felipe off the mountainside," Argrave said quietly, looking up at Orion. "They both died from the fall. Elenore saw this happen."

Orion raised his hands up to his head as his gray eyes widened in shock. He turned away, running his fingers through his hair, damaged after the fight with the Shadowlander. He turned fast enough to stir the air stomped on the floor, shaking the room. "How could you let this happen?!"

The prince loomed dangerously over Argrave, but Galamon grabbed his arm fiercely and fearlessly. "You're shaking the room. The Palace is already crumbling. Don't cause more problems for His Majesty," the knight-commander said, guttural voice low and threatening.

Argrave stared. He was good at acting calm. The key word there, though, was acting. His Brumesingers clambered out of his coat and growled at the towering prince in a tense moment.

"How can you sit there like that?" Orion continued. "They were still... your blood..."

Argrave briefly panicked when Orion mentioned they were his blood, but words came to his mouth and he quickly said, "You have to carry on. Do you think your mother would like it if you succumbed to grief while the kingdom burns?"

"Mother..." Orion closed his eyes.

To his relief, this contented the prince and Orion nodded at Galamon before backing away. "But... Levin?" the prince sat back on the bed, clearly distressed. His fingers ran through his hair in abject despair as tears fell. "Why would he do this? No matter what father had done, his own life...?"

The prince sniffled while everyone else stayed quiet for a long while. Anneliese looked in deep thought even now, amber eyes moving between the two of them in consideration.

Orion froze suddenly, then whipped his head up and narrowed his red eyes. "Did you say that Elenore saw this?"

"Well..." Argrave paused at the unexpected question, petting his Brumesinger's floppy ears. "It was through Vasquer, but yes."

"Ah..." Orion lowered his head once again. "I thought for a moment that Elenore had regained her sight."

"Ehh..." Argrave scratched his neck, and the Brumesingers disappeared back into his coat. "She did."

Orion leaned in, totally alert. "Meaning... her eyes?"

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "She's got it all back. The feet, the eyes, all of it."

Orion reached forth and planted both of his hands on Argrave's knees, exclaiming, "That's wonderful! I...!" his enthusiasm dampened. "She... cannot want to see me, being as she is absent at present. I do not blame her. I listened for father for too long, and left her isolated, alone...even Induen visited her, yet not me..."

When Orion pulled his hands off his knees Argrave rubbed the spots they'd been, feeling that a bruise was inevitable from that tight grip of his. "I can't speak for Elenore," he said decisively.

Orion grew reticent, digesting both the negative and positive news in the latest edition of Keeping Up With the Vasquers. The reports would be considerably smaller henceforth, Argrave supposed.

“Traugott intended to use you as an experiment in testing the boundaries between realms,” Anneliese said suddenly.

Argrave looked to her. “What’s this now?”

Orion, too, looked at Anneliese. “How do you mean?”

Anneliese crossed her arms and came to stand behind Argrave, gathering her thoughts. After getting things in order, she took a deep breath in preparation for a long talk. “Traugott was the original emissary designated to sway the Magisters in far northern Vasquer to support Argrave,” she began, her confidence lending her speech speed. “It stands to reason that he knew of Gerechtigkei. But what is more interesting is that he stopped in Relize to speak to Argrave, specifically.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “He knew you were the source of that knowledge. And expanding upon that... he may have even read that booklet you and I designed for Master Castro. Given the utter lack of constraints his ascension grants him, he could steal that booklet, or even copy it, without issue.”

Argrave followed her words, eyes distant as he contemplated. Slowly, he nodded. “That’s... reasonable.”

“There was a lot of information on that booklet, if you recall,” she squeezed his shoulder to emphasize her point. “There was certainly enough to extrapolate that spirits are one of the few things that can presently bridge the realms between worlds if he had done independent research on the matter. You’ve told me in private that Traugott is a scholarly sort—fascinated by the unknown. A scientist.” She pointed at Orion. “Traugott had an idea. Orion was the key to testing that idea—namely, if spirits could be something that opened the boundary between the Shadowlands and this realm.”

Argrave turned his head around and looked at her. “...and it worked. The spirits of Vasquer froze the man’s portal of shadow in place long enough for a Shadowlander to escape.”

“And the fact he sent that ridiculous apology is evidence enough that he knows how knowledgeable you are,” Anneliese continued. “When I observed him back then, he had intense curiosity about you. I suspect he genuinely bears no malice towards you.”

“But what he did...!” Orion began loudly.

“People can cause great harm without acting in malice,” Anneliese interrupted Orion. “Did he say anything to you, Orion?”

“Ah...” Orion held his head. “I have... a poor memory, generally. Hmm...” he thought back long and hard. “I remember only the last thing he said to me before vanishing. ‘I’ll watch and learn.’”

“My current best idea is that this was some sort of test for him,” Anneliese nodded, affirmed.

“That...” Orion pointed at her. “He said something like that. I can’t remember exactly what. If only my accursed brain did not keep such delible memories, I could offer better recollection. Forgive me, future sister-in-law.”

“Fret not. I have a complete enough picture,” she waved her hand, then stepped to the window and looked out across Dirracha. “Regardless, something more remains. Traugott must have a larger goal. *That* is the pertinent issue.”

"Is it?" Galamon asked her seriously. "From Argrave's account, greater evils come. That is our focus, lest we succumb to them."

"My intuition tells me that Traugott will not settle down and calmly read books as he did in Heroes of Berendar. He has changed," Anneliese looked to Argrave. "And as we saw, he has the potential to be extremely dangerous. One rock in the road can halt an entire caravan, no matter how long the train trailing behind."

Orion rose to his feet. "I will crush his skull in my bare hands," he declared, moving to the window as though to jump. Anneliese stepped aside in caution.

"Hold on a moment!" Argrave stood, too. "One—use the door. And two, don't leave at all. Galamon is right in that we have a different focus right now."

Orion, hand on the windowsill already, stopped and looked back. "Lady Anneliese speaks sensibly. Traugott causes problems. I *can* kill him."

Argrave spread his arms out. "You couldn't kill him earlier in home territory—now you hope to hunt him down?"

Orion turned and sat on the windowsill, looking depressed.

"As much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, there are more important matters. Namely, this entire kingdom," Argrave gestured broadly. "Hostilities have died down, but the war is not over. Terms have not been drafted. Consequences and rewards have not been meted out. For the sake of people—for the sake of rebuilding, and preparing for what's to come, this *needs* to happen."

The prince looked sobered. He crossed his arms and stared at Argrave evenly. "You're right. I... have been adrift, somewhat, since learning the truth of my pantheon. But Boarmask taught me a simple principle: how would I like to be treated were the positions reversed? Thus far, it has made me feel good in choosing."

"Boarmask?" Argrave repeated incredulously.

"Ah," Orion looked at Argrave. "I forget. You two have met. Well... you would know him better than that, too, I suppose." His face hardened somewhat. "We still... have not discussed *you*."

Argrave felt a jolt as what he'd been avoiding came up so suddenly.

"How did you get in that position?" Orion asked.

"I don't know," Argrave answered honestly.

"What happened to Argrave's true soul?" Orion pressed, undeterred.

Argrave caught onto the trend of answers and dictated, "I'll save us both some trouble and answer any questions you might have; I don't know anything about why I'm here, why this happened, or anything. I woke up, I was here, and that's all I know."

Orion's gray eyes stared for a long, long while, boring into Argrave's eyes of the same color. Eventually, the dark-haired prince lowered his head. "I have more to say. But things are as you say: the people

wither as we do nothing. Blood, kin, and family... three words with myriad meanings. My world has turned upside down in ways I pictured impossible months ago. We must speak again later, privately, when things do not threaten to fall apart around us. But I do believe you act for the good of the kingdom. All that Vasquer showed me confirms that opinion—no, that *fact*.”

Argrave was taken aback at the praise. Strangely, it made him feel good—it was a validation of so much of his efforts. Orion was the last person he thought might inspire that feeling.

If Orion knew he hit home, he didn’t show it as he continued, “Now, how do you intend to put these hostilities to bed once and for all?”

“Sumner mentioned a summit with all the nobles of the realm,” Argrave continued, glad to be past that. “I like that idea. I’d need Elenore with me to really set things in stone, but I have a general plan—namely, confirmation of my status as king, distribution of rewards and punishments, and dictation of where this kingdom will head. But first... a certain old man needs to send out some good news to all the lords and ladies of the realm,” Argrave smiled.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 342: Everyone is Here

Crackling from flames echoed against stone walls, the sound rebounding countless times throughout the vast chamber. These flames burned in braziers before grand statues of stone owls, illuminating the stony birds and casting twisted shadows on the walls behind. Active enchantments kept the braziers alight. These enchantments all came from black chairs in a tight circle at the center of the room, each occupied with gray-robed figures with owls stitched on their shoulders. Some braziers were unlit corresponding to what chairs were empty.

“Can we all acknowledge what sort of power this would give him?” a man with dwarfism asked, dressed rather grandiosely in gray and gold. A maroon cloak draped across his chair, definitely larger than he was.

“I think that’s the point, Artur,” Vera responded with unusual respect from her seat beside Hegazar.

Tower Master Castro, opposite Artur, put his hand to his bald head and rubbed his forehead to ward away a headache. “It’s the whole point. We’ve seen what’s coming, all of us. King Argrave was the one to show it to me—show me *all* the proofs collected in this booklet,” he continued, retrieving it from his coat and waving it in the air. “With a strong—”

“I know the necessity,” Artur interrupted, holding out his short, wide hand bedecked with many elaborate golden rings. Their gemstones of myriad color danced with light from the burning flames, almost unnaturally so. “And I agree that it’s Argrave that should do it.”

“Then what’s the problem?” another Magister spread his hands out, confused.

“Every time I pause for breath, some imbecile thinks I’ve run out of things to say,” Artur leaned up in his seat, voice calm despite his insults. “We have to leverage this for the Order’s advantage, Master Castro. I want you to promise us all that, here in this exalted hall.”

“Leverage,” Castro repeated. “Do you care to elaborate?”

Artur placed his hands together, fiddling with one of the loose-fitting rings. “I think it’s long overdue that the royal family finally unload all the of the knowledge that its withheld from the Order—enchantment knowledge, general magic knowledge, methods of A-rank ascension privy only to the Vasquers...” he spread his hands out. “All of it.”

Castro peered ahead seriously. “That would need to go both ways, wouldn’t it?”

“Well...” Artur trailed off, taken aback. “Not... not necessarily. Much of the Order’s knowledge is private property.”

“Argrave intends to establish a parliament that holds genuine power,” Hegazar cut in. “Now, for some of us, the prospect of having the king’s ear might not be especially appealing. But the king does need magical advisement for the benefit of the realm. And if this position was to come with certain... academic advantages, shall we say, to incentivize this?” He clasped his hands together. “Who could say no?”

Moriatran, the old man who’d been glaring at Castro most of the meeting, cast his glare towards Hegazar. “Everyone knows the two of you are owned by him.”

Just then, something shifted behind Castro and someone new entered. The woman walked hastily and nervously to Castro, then whispered into his ear. He listened intently, then waved her away. Everyone focused on the Tower Master.

“Argrave seized Dirracha with Duke Sumner’s aid,” Castro summarized at once.

The more politically interested Magisters shifted in their chairs. Taking the capital—and furthermore, in cooperation with a primary proponent of the south—was ostensibly the end of this war.

“Apparently, they fought against a giant black demon. The death toll was around five thousand, of which a little over half were civilians. Levin and Felipe died in the fighting. It took the combined efforts of hundreds of mages, many of whom were A-rank, to put it down. Argrave claims this to be the beginning of things,” Castro said pointedly. “He’s invited all Magisters of the Order to a summit held at Dirracha, where he will display the creature’s corpse, explain what comes, and decide on a course for the future.” Castro looked around. “We’ve talked this through enough. It’s time to hold the vote,” he decided.

Castro looked around, but none brooked protest. “Based on what I’ve heard, there are four common choices. One: support Argrave against Gerechtigkeits unconditionally. Two: support Argrave against Gerechtigkeits under the condition of mutual exchange of knowledge. Three: support Argrave against Gerechtigkeits while leveraging our power for the Order’s benefit. Four: abstain totally, remaining neutral. Are there any additional policy stances?”

“Five: oppose Argrave,” one added, half in jest.

Castro sighed. “Yes... then, there are thirty-seven of us here, with a total number of fifty-one councilors after Ivan’s death. With fourteen—less than half—missing, we can still proceed. The first round of voting will eliminate one option, until the last is decided.”

A woman walked forth, distributing a small slip of paper and a writing implement alongside it. By the time she gave the last, she went back to the first and retrieved the vote. The votes were counted, and the woman announced, “The fourth choice—abstention—has been removed.”

The man who'd proposed opposition of Argrave laughed that his was not the first choice marked off, and the process began again.

"The fifth choice—opposition of Argrave—has been removed," the woman announced next.

Some of the more enterprising Magisters glanced about the room, sizing up their comrades as the next round proceeded. This time, the woman took more time in counting things up.

The woman lowered a piece of paper and declared, "The first choice—unconditional support—has been removed."

Castro closed his eyes and sighed, but the vote went on. When the papers were delivered this time, they were not immediately filled. The woman handling the voting waited patiently as people leaned to each other and whispered. Then, slowly but surely, the whispers died down and papers were turned in.

The woman tallied the papers, setting them down one after the other. Finally, after a certain number, she stopped. One number had met nineteen votes, evidently.

"The third option—support Argrave while using the Order's leverage for its benefit—is the last remaining option. As such, it is the Order's policy on this development," she declared.

Some murmuring spread throughout the room—half celebration, half-disappointment, and a silent portion who seemed not to care either way.

"The council has chosen," Castro said tightly. "As Tower Master, I am duty-bound to uphold this choice."

His gaze ran across them, making his displeasure blatant.

"Though all were invited, not all wish to attend, surely," Artur spoke, unheeding of Castro's disposition.

"We must decide a delegation. And furthermore, promulgate the news."

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Margrave Reinhardt delicately set aside a paper bearing a broken wax seal on it. This gray wax depicted an owl. He looked to his advisors—namely, Count Delbraun of Jast, his son Elias of Parbon, and Duke Marauch of Elbraille.

"The Order of the Gray Owl has announced public support of Argrave as king... and furthermore, this letter vaguely promises cooperation in light of an unprecedented coming calamity." Reinhardt walked around. "Gerechtigkeit."

"Is this... what is that?" Marauch said ponderingly.

Delbraun strode past Reinhardt and picked up the letter himself, scanning it with his orange eyes. "It says nothing more," he noted, fixing his gray hair back into place. "But it does promise further details after the summit."

Reinhardt looked troubled, though for different reasons. "If there was word of Enrico... we might be able to talk about this more." The margrave turned his head. "He knows far more about it than I do."

Elias looked off to the side, already somewhat privy to the details, but Delbraun asked in concern, "He knows more than you do... meaning you know something?"

“Yes,” the red-haired margrave nodded. “This calamity isn’t some contrivance to justify Order support. It’s the real thing.”

“Could you... tell us more?” Duke Marauch pressed hopefully.

“Not really,” Reinhardt shook his head. “Calamity should tell you all you need to know. But this thing has wiped out civilizations. Argrave has long been privy to it. It’s why he’s done what he has.”

“You kept this from people?” Delbraun narrowed his eyes.

“I had no proof, only Argrave’s words,” the margrave shook his head, long red hair swaying. “Without an authority like the Order weighing in, you would disbelieve me even now.”

Delbraun stepped closer. “But we’re to be family by marriage. Your son knew, didn’t he?”

“That’s beside the point,” Reinhardt said through clenched teeth. “My best friend is *imprisoned*. He’s practically the king’s family, given his relation to Nikoletta—and that cousin of his is missing, searching for her father.” Reinhardt clenched his gauntleted hand, then stepped away in irritation. “A summit with most of the influential people in this continent approaches. We have more pressing concerns. Dirracha is within sight.” Reinhardt looked to the tent flaps, where beyond one could see the grand city in the dawn light only just.

“If you want me to ignore this issue... then perhaps we ought to discuss what it is the south wants from the king,” Delbraun continued, finally revealing his true aim.

Margrave Reinhardt hesitantly nodded, realizing Delbraun had played up his offense at being excluded to force him to acquiesce to this talk of negotiations. “The war did much damage. We endured prolonged battle... what should be done, then?”

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Leopold Dandalan watched a caravan leave from the city of Relize, holding his hand to his back and grimacing as he stretched somewhat awkwardly.

“Are you sure you’re fit to travel?” Hirnala, Leopold’s Veidimen wife, asked of him in a neutral tone. She had pale skin, bright blue eyes, and short gray hair that did not hide her elven ears. She stood a foot taller than the patrician, and he had to crane his neck.

“You’re always asking if I’m fit,” the old man said bitterly. “Have I ever been unfit to do what I want?”

She tilted her head. “I suppose not. By some miracle, you’ve not had your heart expire in coitus. I do wonder how long that will last. I’m told you’re well over a hundred, but you look three hundred. The aging in this society is rather perplexing to adjust to.”

He fixed her with a bitter gaze. “Waiting for me to expire?”

“If it happens, it happens. But I like our business arrangement,” she said with a shrug.

Leopold sighed. “And here I thought I was the rationalist. Well, it’s true. Profits have been good, even despite the war...”

“Because of it, perhaps,” his wife suggested. “But that’s ending.”

“Ostensibly. The things written on that note... something else is waiting for us.” Leopold thought back to that paper he’d received. “I have to get the best benefit I can. And on that tune... your allies will be helpful. You got a letter from them, didn’t you? Who is coming?”

“It was His Majesty’s directive, not my idea. And... only two come across the ocean,” Hirnala said. “Patriarch Dras and Rowe the Righteous.”

“Two?!” Leopold repeated. “How is that going to inspire respect, establish them as allies? They need a grand procession, a host of soldiers, not... *two!*”

Hirnala laughed. “The vessel they’re taking is rather awe-inspiring. I imagine few on this continent have seen its like.”

“A big boat is hardly pertinent. Dirracha is *inland*,” he reminded her condescendingly.

Hirnala looked at Leopold. “I did not mention boats, husband.”

The aged patrician frowned, bushy brows almost concealing his eyes.

“Time wastes. His Majesty is expecting us, and given our relationship as allies, it would be best to arrive before the summit begins,” she dictated, walking back towards their estate in the city.

Leopold thought back to his father, strangely. Something the man once said stuck in his ears more and more, these days.

Son... his father said, in that tone of his that made it difficult to distinguish if he was disappointed or not. Marrying for money’s probably a dumb idea, but it’s even dumber if you’re already rich.

Leopold sighed and walked after her, leaning on his cane. Curiosity lingered in his mind, replaying those words of the vessel that Hirnala mentioned again and again.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 343: Blood’s No Bond

Argrave stared at the dark gray corpse of the Shadowlander from his place at the entrance to the Dragon Palace. The monstrous humanoid had been laid across a makeshift wooden platform and secured by ropes, and now twenty men carried it by wooden poles fixed to the platform. Despite the days gone by, its corpse had not decayed even slightly. Nothing, not even the ants, would touch it willingly. Even after death, its flesh felt as hard as stone. Facing two... indeed, facing *hordes* of these creatures, as they would have to in the distant future... he was reminded of why he rushed so hard for strength and power.

“I know just the person to display it in a... frightful manner, so as to cow our guests,” Elenore broke into Argrave’s thought. “In addition, we’ll have it in the throne room. That’s the place worse affected by the fighting, and it’s big enough to host everyone that will be coming. I remember how much you like psychological tricks like those.”

Argrave nodded without much consideration, his mind wandering elsewhere. His royal guards and Galamon stood behind him, watching and waiting.

"I've sent out those royal decrees to Whitefields demanding Rovostar's head. In addition, I helped news of the Order's declaration get into... certain people's hands," Elenore stepped in front of Argrave, perhaps hoping to get his attention better. "Perhaps once Vera and Hegazar return, we can take a more personal hand in retrieving Duke Enrico, provided he is not returned already."

Argrave considered that, looking up. As he did, he failed to notice Elenore's gaze settle upon someone behind him.

"Rovostar's A-rank. Hegazar's illusions won't help much, and—" Argrave paused as he felt a presence near. He thought it was Galamon, but when he turned he spotted Orion.

"Elenore," the prince greeted her first. "It's... I cannot describe how warm it makes me feel to see you walk once again."

Elenore nodded and crossed her arms and said nothing in response.

Orion's eyes fell upon the Shadowlander. "You should have asked me to help, brother. You've asked so little of me..."

Argrave looked at Orion squarely. Despite his grief, he'd shown himself to be stable—the prince had not harmed anyone in the time they'd been here, and his emotional outbursts improved day by day. That said... the man himself did not look good. His eyes were sunken and dark, and he looked... ill, frankly. Argrave wasn't sure Orion could get ill, so he must have felt truly terrible to look this bad.

"I haven't needed your energy. Well, not until now," Argrave said, dismissing his thoughts. "Leopold is bringing along some people from Relize—architects. But I think I'll need your help, too." As the laborers bearing the Shadowlander grew near, Argrave lightly shepherded the two of them out of the way, and his royal guard moved with him. "You'll have to work fast and hard. This needs to get done before everyone else arrives."

"Well... certainly, I can help." Orion contributed with a strangely dull brightness.

"On that note, I've just remembered I need to take care of something," Elenore said stoically. "Please, excuse me."

Though Elenore spoke kindly, her haste to leave was all too obvious... to Argrave, at least. Orion seemed totally ignorant that Elenore did not want to be around him.

"So, this matter... I'm excited to help," Orion nodded. "Where is Lady Anneliese?"

"She's been helping Elenore with scouting things out—keeping track of armies and such," Argrave said dismissively. "Just helping get a timeframe for us to prepare everything for this summit. This is a big event, and a lot rides on it. But as for that thing... come on, let's walk."

When Argrave finished talking, he watched Orion briefly when he didn't move. The man rubbed his eyes and blinked rapidly.

"Are you alright?" Argrave asked, confused.

Orion fixed his gray eyes upon him. He only now noticed they were bloodshot. "These nights... sleep does not grace me."

“Why?” Argrave pressed. He grabbed Orion’s arm and moved him forward, and the two set off down the Royal Road.

“Noise. The wind. I never knew it was so loud,” Orion looked out across the city as they walked down.

“Up atop the mountain, the wind rages especially hard. Yet even then it does not drown my thoughts as I hoped it to. Without the others speaking to me, my thoughts are all I hear anymore. They are a dreadful sound.” Orion shuddered. “Have you ever... had trouble sleeping?”

Argrave slowed his pace to talk better, keeping his eyes on the steep, partially damaged path as he repeated, “Trouble sleeping? All the time. I just have to do something to occupy my mind until I’m tired enough I have to sleep, usually.”

“And if that doesn’t work, what else could I do?” Orion pressed.

Argrave frowned. “...it always has worked, I’m afraid.”

“Ah.” Orion nodded, his unkempt black hair blowing about in the wind.

“What are you thinking about?” Argrave asked curiously.

“I don’t know who I am, anymore,” Orion said heavily. “And without the buzzing voices of the deceivers... without some larger purpose... it’s all I can think about. I think of my actions, of what I did and what I should do, and of the family that left me—both my deceivers and my blood. These damnable thoughts are more persistent than starving rats near a granary, and I hate it,” he finished venomously, clenching his hands into tight fists. “It’s worse than having their whispers pollute my mind. I thought the rot was gone, but it persists in a different form. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Argrave took a deep breath, not knowing what to say for a few tense moments. He lightly suggested, “I think Boarmask gave you some sound advice regarding what to do. In all your dealings, just ask, ‘how would I like to be treated in their position?’ I don’t think you can err too far if you heed that advice.”

“I think... you and I, our situation... it’s not so different,” Orion noted, gaze fixed to the road. “I’ve had months to come to terms with the Argrave I knew being replaced, months of explanation from Vasquer, and months to parse through what you did with my half-brother’s body. But one thing defies my comprehension: how did you... keep moving? How did you handle your awakening?”

They finally came near the city, and Argrave pointed off to the side as they worked to their direction. “I didn’t. I kept my head down and kept moving, striving to get what I wanted.” Argrave shrugged.

Orion looked frustrated, and he put his hand to the back of his head and asked, “How do you know what you want?”

Argrave stopped briefly. “Don’t you enjoy certain things?”

“All I enjoyed has turned to poison in my mind. All I’ve ever done...” Orion stepped away, searching for words. “I was but a vessel to another’s will. Though I loathe it now, I never felt more alive then.”

“But you went south, disillusioned with Felipe,” Argrave pointed out. “You met Boarmask. You met Vasquer. You defied your father, and you kept this city whole. Didn’t you do that because *you* wanted to?”

"If I truly wanted this, why do I feel so empty?" Orion asked.

"Invert the problem," Galamon said.

Orion and Argrave both looked to him.

"If you don't know what you want..." Galamon continued. "Think about what you *don't* want. Work from there."

Argrave nodded slowly. "He's right, come to think of it. The whole reason I set out to stop Gerechtigkei was because I didn't fancy dying. Along the way, things just sort of... fell into place." He set back along the road, walking a bit closer to Orion. "I'm going to posit two things. Maybe you agree, maybe you don't. One: I think a lot of that emptiness is stemming from Levin and Felipe's death."

Orion's face twisted, and he looked away. "...I heard people celebrating father's death. Heard people suggest that he was actually that foul creature Traugott summoned, his true form revealed to stop you from taking his kingdom."

Argrave nodded slowly. "I think all you can do is nothing, at least about that. You might not believe me, but those feelings will fade as time passes. I think the fact you feel empty right now is evidence that you aren't. If you really *were* empty, I don't think you'd care. Empty people don't feel empty, they just *are*. At least, that's my reasoning. Can't speak from experience."

The prince closed his eyes as they walked through the street. Argrave realized only now that a great deal of the people watched them. He seemed to have built up some good will in the city. Ideally, that'd be maintained for a long while.

"Without something guiding me... I can't see the point of any of this," Orion shook his head.

Argrave laughed, though he felt somewhat guilty for doing so. Orion looked at him, bewildered. Eventually, he stopped laughing, grabbed his brother's shoulder and said, "That's the most normal thing you've ever said, Orion. Nobody sees the point. They *search* for it. Where they find it... that varies. There's no wrong answer, necessarily. And I think I'd be doing you a disservice if I told you what I think the point is, because the whole idea is that it's *your* point." He looked up to the sky for a moment and muttered, "You've made me get all philosophical. I don't like doing that."

"My head is even more disturbed," Orion walked along with him, arms crossed. "But... you said you had two things to say?"

"That's right. I just think there might actually be something you do want to do. And that's because you'd already been doing it." Argrave tapped his shoulder, then led him along, saying, "Come on."

Argrave led Orion quickly through the last bit of the street, heading for a familiar place. It had been sorely changed since last they were here. Argrave supposed he had to count himself lucky that it was not buried beneath the falling rubble of the Dragon Palace, being as it was located at the base of the mountain.

"Vasquer...!" Orion realized, stepping forth away from Argrave's side. "Gods, how could I have been so stupid?"

“You were injured, and had a lot on your mind,” Argrave reminded him, stepping after. “Still do have a lot on your mind, it seems. It’s perfectly understandable.” Argrave looked at the partially destroyed gentleman’s club where a stone staircase was plainly visible. Some men stood guard—Elenore’s. Argrave stepped closer. “This summit, the capstone for this war... it’s the grand culmination of a lot of different things. I’ve already conversed with Vasquer about how she can help out. Do you want to?”

Orion looked back, then nodded. “I do.”

“And what’s more... do you want to see her free?” Argrave smiled.

“You’ve made your point,” Orion stepped towards the staircase. “I only wish you’d come to me, forced me to realize what I was forgetting.”

Argrave kept smiling, swallowing his thoughts—namely, that he was too afraid to approach Orion. Strangely, even though Orion had lost none of his ability... Argrave did not hesitate much in taking the next step forward. The giant man that’d gone up against the Plague Jester, the Shadowlander, and all manner of abominations seemed a little more approachable than he had before. Argrave sincerely hoped this was a lasting trend.

“Clearing a path large enough for her will be a bit complex—the Dragon Palace is above, and the last thing we need now is some sort of cave-in. That’s why we need the architects,” Argrave began, following Orion along. “But there are some things I know we can take care of now...”

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 344: The Summit

Argrave hefted a crown in his hand—it had a black metal band, chicken egg-sized gemstones at several points, and gold decorating it gaudily. Everything seemed to be in order with it, so he looked up and said, “Thanks for bringing this, Leopold.”

“Hmm,” the wizened old man grunted. “Let’s not forget I provided even more manpower for those forts you took. Some of them had only seven loyal men inside. You really overextended to seize this place.” He wore black clothes in Relizean style, with a wide-brimmed black tellerbarret with a golden feather. He had Argrave’s snake sunburst on his doublet. “I don’t intend on being a paper tiger at this summit, Your Majesty. The people of Relize expect me to represent their interests, regardless of our alliance.”

“Be as papery or fleshy a tiger as you want,” Argrave nodded.

Leopold sized him up. As he did, two more footsteps echoed across the battered Dragon Palace, and Argrave turned his head. Hirnala and Anneliese walked side-by-side, catching up.

“I promised to show Hirnala the city. She almost made me write it down,” Leopold said quietly. “That one wants so many agreements in writing. It’s astounding.” The aged patrician sighed. “I should go do that. The road was long, there is time yet before the last arrive, and we can talk about how to approach this summit tomorrow. With your leave, Your Majesty.”

“Sure. Go.” Argrave waved him away.

The man walked away, speaking to the three of them while Argrave awkwardly held the crown. He didn't want to wear the thing, but he didn't have a place for it, either. Eventually, Anneliese broke off from the two of them and joined Argrave as they departed to see the city.

"Hirnala is fun. She says what she thinks, always," Anneliese reflected. "I think... with the architects working on freeing Vasquer, we have all we wanted."

Argrave nodded intently. "And Rovostar?"

Anneliese's amber eyes darkened somewhat. "...no news, I fear. Elenore and I can only attest that discontent has settled there once the letters were sent."

Argrave took one hand off the crown and rubbed his temple. "I had hoped to have Duke Enrico present for this..."

He left out his worry about the potential of Nikoletta's loss. It bothered him to leave a matter unfinished for so long. Last time something bothered him this much, he'd gone to the north disguised as a snow elf. He didn't think that particular solution would work this time.

"Oh," Argrave said, drawn from his haze. "I got something for you."

He handed the crown off to Galamon, who received it wordlessly. Then, he reached into his pocket and retrieved what appeared to be a wooden box. Upon further inspection, there were some intricacies to it. He held it out to Anneliese.

"Here," he said.

Anneliese tilted her head, taking it in hand. She fiddled with it, quickly grasping what it was. It had moving parts that rearranged.

"Some vendor was selling it," Argrave explained. "A testament to people's resiliency if they're trading even now, I guess. It's not exactly like the one you described, but you said something about a puzzle box a long time ago that stuck with me. I—"

As she fiddled with it, it clicked, and the puzzle was complete. The top of it came open.

"Ah..." Argrave scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. "Maybe... I should have gotten a more complex puzzle. I enchanted it with an active ward, so it should be quite durable."

"You remembered." When Anneliese lifted her head up, she was beaming. "I love it."

Argrave smiled in kind, then quickly diminished her praise, saying, "Probably should've actually put something *inside* there..."

"I think it better you did not. I want to fill it," she decided.

"Then it all works out," he held his arms out. "Wish I could do simple things like this more often, but it's not to be. We have to meet the music."

Anneliese nodded. "And the music comes louder every day."

#####

Castro laid eyes upon Dirrachia, perhaps four miles away. Despite the distance, the city was tall enough to be seen above the horizon. Their party of Magisters travelled by foot or horse, largely, to preserve their magic for this summit. Even this far, certain details were distinguishable. Argrave's banner, with its black flag and golden snake sunburst, hung from the walls to demonstrate its holder. Yet another gold shone even brighter: the scales of the giant feathered serpent curled about the city.

The tower master had always thought the mountain in that city too-large, yet the snake curled around it many times with her miles-long body. Despite the size of the rock she seemed hard pressed to fit, winding upwards in a great spiral that coiled around the mountain and the palace both. Her proud head stood tall at the apex of the building, gazing about the land as though to see all as her great mane of golden feathers moved with the wind.

"It would seem that the rumors spread were not all false," Artur, the Magister with dwarfism, noted. Castro had never seen him walk—instead, his mantle carried him off the ground, supporting his body as though the fabric was a solid thing. "That must be the royal family's ancestral serpent, Vasquer. I never thought to lay eyes upon it. Then again, I never thought it was real."

Castro looked back towards the city. He felt, then, that this kingdom had woken up from his slumber. "I think you will be more surprised just how many of the rumors were true in totality."

"Is it just me, or..." Vera began, trailing off. "The palace looks a bit..."

"Damaged?" Hegazar finished, concern on his voice.

"They did have a battle with a demon," Castro reminded them. "I'm told this so-called Shadowlander devastated the place."

Hegazar and Vera exchanged a glance of restrained terror. Hegazar suggested, "Perhaps we can... move a little faster? Even much faster?"

"No," Castro refused bluntly. "Margrave Reinhardt and his forces are moving past. It'll only be a hassle if we rush to arrive at the same time they do."

The couple looked greatly disconcerted, and Vera even muttered beneath her breath, "...that bastard."

#####

As Margrave Reinhardt and his trusted council rode at the head of their forces, a man followed by a dozen golden-armored troops stepped out of the capital. For a brief moment, Reinhardt swore he saw Felipe, and his hands tightened around the reins of his Redsnow. But as the person came closer... he realized it was Prince Orion.

His grip slackened slightly when he realized the man wore fine clothes instead of armor. "Let's meet him," the margrave decided, looking to Delbraun, Elias, and Marauch.

They gave words of confirmation, then followed behind as he rode forth. Slowly, their two parties converged. Standing, Orion was perhaps a foot lower than Reinhardt's height on horseback. He had a dominating presence.

“Greetings, Margrave Reinhardt,” Prince Orion greeted, pounding his fist against his chest. “His Majesty Argrave sent me out to retrieve you and the other guests. You’re welcome to bring a sizable escort, but the host must remain outside the walls.”

The margrave stared sternly, though inside he was surprised that the infamous Orion was acting so docile. His eyes wandered to the golden-armored knights behind him. They had the dreaded waxpox, he realized. He spared a glance to his son, then looked back to Orion.

“Let us get things in place,” the margrave nodded.

“Of course,” Orion nodded. “I will wait.”

The margrave cast a glance at the Dragon Palace far above where the great serpent Vasquer waited. It was his time to enter this ancient city once again, it seemed.

#####

Elias looked across the city of Dirracha with his one good eye as they traversed the mountainous Royal Road leading to the Dragon Palace, following Orion. Their party consisted of all Reinhardt’s close council, and those sworn to Duke Enrico coming to speak in his absence. The devastation in the city was far beyond what he had been expecting. Helmuth, the margravate’s wizard, seemed tense, and his dancing purple eyes jumped from patrol to patrol.

“Margrave Reinhardt...” the wizard stepped ahead and said quietly. “We should not be here. There are enough high-ranking mages to wipe us out without a thought,” he finished with urgency. “Not to mention... Sumner’s men are here, too.”

Margrave Reinhardt did pause at that. “Sumner...?” he paused. “Could he have... worked with Argrave, ambushed us?”

They did stop at the road, but a new voice speaking caused them all to look ahead.

“Welcome, Margrave Reinhardt,” a woman greeted. Elias stared at her. He thought she resembled Nikoletta a little, but the more he stared the further the similarity faded. She had stony gray eyes and a cool, calm demeanor.

“Princess Elenore?” the margrave said in hardened disbelief, stepping forth.

“I see your sight is as good as mine,” she said dryly. “That used to be an insult, but not so anymore. It has been a while, hasn’t it?”

Recognition dawned on Elias, and his eyes widened in shock. Elenore was rumored to be blind and maimed, yet here she stood. His breath quickened.

“You... recovered?” Count Delbraun of Jast asked cautiously.

“I wish I could claim that, but no. I was healed,” she shook her head. “And before you ask... it was by His Majesty, obviously. He is rather glad you’ve come here today. The summit will be held in the throne room—until then, you might rest in some prepared chambers. I am to host you until that time comes if it pleases.”

As hope blossomed within Elias—hope that Argrave did not mislead, and that Rose truly could be treated—he made up his mind to press on, no matter Helmuth’s caution. And looking to his father, he saw the same answer writ there.

“Lead on,” Margrave Reinhardt said evenly.

#####

In due time, the Magisters of the Order of the Gray Owl were similarly received and brought to a separate room where Vasilisa hosted. They offered rich, if simple, meals, and gave the guests the opportunity to rest from the long road. Elenore dealt with reintroducing Duke Sumner to the southern nobles, and attempting to both gather information and mend the rift of mistrust that might’ve formed.

After a suitable amount of time passed, they were all led into the throne room of the Dragon Palace. To say the least, it was not as most remembered it.

The majority of the ceiling was simply missing, having collapsed. And the cause of that was plainly on display, suspended on the sole standing pillar in the room. The Shadowlander hung, crucified. Its giant purple eye had been kept forced open, and it seemed to peer across all who entered ominously. People viewed it with equal parts curiosity and revulsion. There were no seats or tables, only the still-standing throne in the back of the room, empty.

As everyone gathered, they divided into distinct groups: the southern nobility and the Magisters of the Order. Some mutterings about being forced to wait echoed in the groups, but the leaders—namely, Reinhardt and Castro—seemed patiently optimistic. Then, at the front, Elenore rang a bell.

“His Majesty Argrave enters with his betrothed, Anneliese.” she declared.

Everyone looked towards the two identical entrances behind the throne expectantly for movement. Then, they turned their heads upwards as shadows danced across the room from the wide-open ceiling. People stepped away, alarmed, as something gargantuan entered inside.

The great serpent Vasquer’s head lowered into the room, coming to hover above the throne. Her golden eyes watched them all. King Argrave sat atop her head, bearing a resplendent crown and kingly black mantle. The one introduced as Anneliese stood behind him, her hand on his shoulder.

When people were adapting to the new change, others started to emerge from the rooms behind the throne. On the left came a towering knight armored in dark gray steel, leading an entourage of steel-armored knights that bore daggers of what appeared to be obsidian on their belts. On the right came Prince Orion, leading his golden-armored royal knights. Both groups took disciplined positions slightly ahead and beside the snake Vasquer’s head, waiting and guarding.

Argrave’s gray eyes surveyed the room. “Welcome,” he said. “You’ve come a long way, largely for the purpose of putting an end to this war. My hope is that this is productive for all present, and for all the people of Vasquer.”

People shifted on their feet uneasily at the new king’s grandiose appearance and unabashed confidence. He continued unaffected, saying, “Today, we have Magister Vasilisa here, representing the interests of the Archduchess of the North, Diana of Quadreign,” he pointed. “We have Leopold Dandalan, representing those of Relize and Atrus. There is Margrave Reinhardt, representing the south. And Tower

Master Castro, representing the Order of the Gray Owl. And... myself, representing all the people of Vasquer as king. If there are any corrections to be made, it'd be best to make them now. I want this to be orderly and efficient," he dictated domineeringly.

Time passed, but none made any protest. Eventually, Margrave Reinhardt asked, "Then... we can begin?"

"Not yet," Argrave held his hand out to stop him. "The last party hasn't arrived yet," he noted, looking up towards the ceiling.

People followed the king's gaze, not understanding what he looked for. Then, they started to hear calls of alarm outside from the distant city. People shifted about in confusion. Then, with no warning at all, something filled the empty spot in the ceiling, colliding with the Dragon Palace and setting the whole building shaking.

People panicked once again, and this time their alarm was not so quick to fade. Two titanic scaled hands clutched onto the partially destroyed ceiling, claws holding tight to keep itself up. Where open sky had once been, a snow-white dragon filled the void, hanging onto the palace wall and craning its neck so that its head fit within.

"There we go," Argrave nodded contently, crossing one leg over the other as its wingspan hid the sky. "I was wondering how we might plug that hole in the roof. Very considerate." The serpent Vasquer moved her neck just as the dragon lowered its, the two coming to meet. Argrave held his hand out and greeted, "Patriarch Dras. So nice of you to come. You too, Rowe."

A bald snow elf grasped Argrave's hand, shaking it as a bridge between the two reptiles. Dras had resplendent ceremonial armor on, and all of the nobles of the south regarded him cautiously. The Magisters of the Order, however, kept their eyes firmly fixed on the old snow elf behind the patriarch, seemingly awed and afraid of his presence simultaneously.

"We are allied, after all," Dras said with a grin. "Of course I would come."

Vasquer and the dragon both pulled away, coming to their previous spots in the room. From afar, the scene seemed like a painting of old; the king and queen in the position of prominence, the gray-robed Magisters on one side, the nobles of the south on the other, the distant and foreign patriarch watching from above, each and all gathered for an event to be recorded in history.

Argrave explained, "Patriarch Dras is the master of Veiden, and my ally. He invaded Vasquer some time ago, but we... resolved that misunderstanding," he said simply. "With that, everyone is here," Argrave nodded serenely.

Elenore walked before Vasquer, placing her hand on the serpent's head. "The summit can begin," she declared loudly.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 345: Terms for Survival

After Elenore's declaration that the summit could begin, there was a prevailing indecision in the parties arrayed before Argrave. Despite not having been declared the leader of this summit, his bombastic

displays made all defer to him despite the undeniable fact the group of Magisters held the most personal power in the room.

And so the king seated on his living throne spoke first. "To begin, I will clearly establish something for all parties. It's the reason that the Veidimen turned away from their invasion of this kingdom, the reason the Order of the Gray Owl is here today, and the reason I endeavored to mend this shattered kingdom after King Felipe III's prolonged misrule." Argrave's gaze scanned the crowd. "Gerechtigkeit, a living calamity, is going to manifest on this continent. Our mortal realm is to become the playground for gods, spirits, and all their servants. This malignant entity endeavors to cause the end of all."

It was a common enough prophecy to draw ire under normal circumstances, but not days ago people had thought the ancient serpent Vasquer was but rumor and myth. Most thought perhaps she had existed once, but those days of legend were long gone. Dragons, too, had not been seen in many centuries. Now both loomed above, and the forever-neutral Order of the Gray Owl all but promised to break its neutrality. None mocked what Argrave said in the face of this unprecedented event.

"You make these claims on what basis, Your Majesty?" Leopold Dandalan, ever the cynic, asked.

"On our history," Rowe the Righteous interrupted. "Your kind are young, your records stretching back only centuries. I've read what few books of history you have. What accounts persist from your oldest records are grossly inaccurate, either taken from biased sources or written as myth. It's little wonder important events like this dodge your eye. Veidimen scriptures, and unbiased Veidimen records, tell of what comes once again."

Some of the prouder nobles in the margrave's retinue bristled at the snow elf's disrespect, but Argrave raised his hand. "Rowe is right, but he forgets a simple principle: the young can't be blamed for a lack of wisdom. Our civilization has advanced fast enough we've never before endured something like this," the king said, putting a positive spin on what was obviously not meant so.

"Fortunately, Rowe is an S-rank mage, and so has access to these important documents," Argrave gestured to the wizened snow elf atop the dragon. "He brought these records he mentions at my request. They aren't brief, but they also aren't the only source at our disposal... nor the only witness to these sources."

People noticed that Argrave deliberately mentioned Rowe was an S-rank mage, but purposeful or accidental, the knowledge was conveyed: not merely this Patriarch Dras, but also an S-rank Veidimen mage heeded his request.

"We have those records with us," Dras confirmed on Rowe's behalf. "I hoped to copy and distribute them here."

Some people looked to Patriarch Dras atop the dragon's head, then to Anneliese behind the king, muttering something as the two were compared. Theories formed by the second, and Galamon furrowed his brows as he listened.

"I can take care of copying and distributing those documents after this first meeting," Elenore confirmed, looking up to Argrave for approval.

“So it is,” Argrave nodded back contentedly. “But I imagine many of you will feel discontent looking at Veidimen history alone.” Argrave gestured towards Castro. “Some months ago, I delivered Castro a booklet compiled by Anneliese and myself. You should illuminate everyone present as to what you discovered.”

After being so abruptly called upon, the tower master was not quick to respond. He looked around, shifting on his feet before stepping ahead of the rest so as to speak better.

Castro took a deep breath and said, “The first thing discovered, initially, was an ancient stone disc. When dragon blood was placed upon it, it showed someone nearby a vision. I was the first... *user*... of this disc.” The old man’s eyes scanned the room, vital and alert. “As the Tower Master, this was concerning... but not enough proof.” He looked back to the Magisters behind. “I assigned several people with the duty of confirming the rest of the leads Argrave supplied. Gesche, you begin,” he directed a woman.

Gesche, a woman who looked middle-aged, was quickly singled out as the crowd of Magisters distanced themselves from her. She described quickly, “I was given a group of laborers and mages and directed to an area in midwestern Vasquer—a mountain just before the wetlands, so wild as to be inhospitable for all but the most monstrous creatures. It was a mausoleum of sorts, partially flooded and overrun with these gargantuan aquatic reptiles. They spewed acid powerful enough to break through B-rank wards and cut through or dissolve a man entirely.”

Gesche looked at Argrave. “Fortunately, the directions given prepared us for that. At a certain point, we found a great record room—dozens of sculptures, records etched into stone, each and all describing the calamity Argrave mentioned. Specifically, it spoke of the Divine’s Feudalism. Of how gods descend upon this land, balancing opportunism with fierce resistance to the greater evil, *Gerechtigkeit*. The people, human and elf both, king and queen all, become serfs or slaves to the divine and their servants. Mortals are viewed as proxies in this great war on the rebalancing scales of calamity.”

People drunk in Gesche’s words eagerly as the king watched on as though he knew all of what she would say.

Before her words could be dissected, another male Magister contributed, “I learned of the same. I was sent beyond Vasquer to the mountains that divide this land from the Burnt Desert. There, I walked in the imperial palace of the southron elves of old. Their people were embittered by gods, turning against each other in holy wars and fruitless rebellions until their empire emerged to fight the malignant judge.”

Margrave Reinhardt crossed his arms and nodded, but Duke Sumner stepped forth and inquired, “Have either of you two any genuine proof of any of this, or merely your words?”

“I brought the sculptures back to the Tower,” Gesche rebutted proudly. “I brought the stone etchings containing myriad writings. I brought genealogies, histories, each and all discussing how their society was shaped by the calamity of the past. I even brought record of how the great serpent Vasquer led people against *Gerechtigkeit*,” the magister finished, pointing to Vasquer. “All these incontrovertible proofs can be here tomorrow, if it is necessary.”

“I imagine you also brought home a lovely haul of treasures, too,” King Argrave cut in, causing Gesche to grow quiet immediately. “But that’s only two accounts. We have more, I trust?”

Another Magister came forth, describing the next far-flung ruin—an exposed dwarven settlement lying beneath the sea.

“...these people had a trophy of one of their victories in the great war,” the Magister explained grimly. “It... was human-like, but... near the size of a mountain. Its bones were propped upright by an elaborate mechanical structure. Opposing it was a marble sculpture of a chariot ridden by dwarves, each of them with a laurel wreath on their heads and thunder as their weapon. It... few things can describe the sheer scope of the scene.”

“Dwarves?” said Artur in dissatisfaction. “What do you mean?”

“They’re a different race,” Argrave cut in. “I hope you retrieved the records there.”

The Magister nodded, and soon enough the next spoke. The tyranny of the divine, the great battles raging across the land, the undeniable paleontological evidence, all with a common thread of the arbiter known as *Gerechtigkeit*. The tales and testimonies piled up, convincing the secular nobles of the validity of this calamity by the second. Some even brought minute proof with them, having anticipated their experiences would be called to question. It was no sweeping proof, but it was nonetheless additive.

By the end of it all, only one dissenter persisted: a baron sworn to Delbraun of Jast. “Apocalyptic tales persist in every culture,” the man insisted—thin yet shrewd-looking, most thought him a scholar. “Near all religions describe the creation of the world, what happens after death, and how the world will end. These unanswerable questions have been answered in every faith and every culture time and time again. Who’s to say there’s no common—”

“Don’t embarrass me, Christoph,” Count Delbraun said, placing his hand on the baron’s shoulder. “I think all of what was posited needs to be reviewed, Your Majesty,” he continued. “But... I am comfortable proceeding with the notion all of this is true... for now. Everyone?”

“I am content.” Margrave Reinhardt looked across his people. “Is there anyone else who would protest?”

None came forth, though from the urgent mutterings it could be gathered that it was not for lack of trying. The sources were reputable, varied, and unilaterally consistent. No hole could be poked without the records the Magisters claimed to have.

“I’m glad I’m with reasonable people,” Argrave nodded, pleasure apparent on his face. He lifted his hand up and pointed to his left. “This creature you see hanging here is from a place known as the Shadowlands. Intervention from spirits bridged the thinning gap between the gods’ realm and ours, allowing this monstrosity to come forth. It took a little over a dozen A-rank mages, and hundreds of B-rank mages to take this thing down.” He lowered his pointed finger. “Creatures like *that* are among the least of what we face... and steel alone barely chips its skin. Magister Traugott was responsible for its... early summoning.”

Some of the Magisters present muttered in surprise, but none tried to defend the accused; Traugott had no friends.

“With that extensive preamble out of the way, I’ll get to the point,” Argrave rested both hands atop his knee and leaned forward. Anneliese’s hand slid off his shoulder. “This kingdom needs cohesion now

more than it ever has. We cannot afford to waste time with some internecine conflict. King Felipe III is dead. His heir, Orion, and his daughter, Elenore, both support my claim, as you can plainly see.”

Elenore remained calm when she was called upon but Orion smiled somewhat, remaining vigilant in his role as a guard.

“I was coronated in Relize. There, I promised the people to right the wrongs my father caused, and to form a parliament for the good of the people.” Argrave grew stern as he said in a low voice, “I intend to make good on both vows. As such, it’s long overdue to bind all of Vasquer together under one centralized force with the intent of fighting against what I know is coming. The army, the economy, the government... all must be reformed to adapt to what comes. What does not bend in the wind will break from the gale, and a tornado comes to rend this land.”

Argrave rose to his feet. “If you wish it, the most important and eligible of you here will form the core of my parliament,” he said. “This new organization will have legitimate power. You will have the ear of the monarch, true legislative and governmental authority, and the key point... the right to confirm coronations, now and forevermore.”

Some people were swept up hearing that promise despite vaguely knowing that Argrave had declared as much back at Relize. This reform would change the kingdom forevermore, and whether stirred by the promise of power or the prospect of positive reformed, they *were* stirred.

Magister Vasilisa knelt down and declared, “Your Majesty, Archduchess Diana of the North long ago declared her unconditional support. I will reaffirm that here today.”

“Yes. And a great many seats are already filled by people in northern Vasquer,” Argrave nodded.

Leopold Dandalan bowed, Hirnala supporting him on one side as he leaned on his cane heavily. “Relize and Atrus offer their humble support, Your Majesty.”

“And so, too, will the loyal people of Relize be rewarded,” Argrave continued. “So, Margrave Reinhardt, Tower Master Castro? What say you?”

Margrave Reinhardt closed his eyes and sighed but stepped forth and knelt. “Your Majesty, the south would ask something of you before submission.”

Argrave looked down upon him from his spot atop Vasquer. “What might that be?”

“War has wrecked the closest regions of the south due to prolonged battle against Felipe’s loyalists,” Reinhardt began. “We seek war reparations.”

“That’s fair,” Argrave nodded. “And it benefits the realm, furthermore, if all within it are taken care of.” The king lifted his finger in caution, adding, “But I will not give gold or other such compensation. Instead, this will be a reparation in the truest sense of the word. I will see to it that all troubles in the south caused by this war are duly remedied by action.”

Margrave Reinhardt gave no thanks, merely continued, “There are those in my number who wish to be rewarded for their battle against Felipe’s loyalists.”

Argrave slowly clasped his hands together. “I have promised certain gains to others already. Relize, for instance, has territorial gains along the North Sea. The lords of Atrus have been rewarded for bending

the knee, and I cannot renege on my promises to allow them to keep their territory... and further, I cannot end the debts sold to the patricians for repayment. Dirracha will go to Hegazar and Vera for their service in bringing House Quadreign to my fold."

A great degree of shock spread throughout the room at that declaration. People looked to the couple, but the two seemed oddly unhappy, like they'd been cheated somehow.

"And territorial gains in central Vasquer?" Margrave Reinhardt pressed with bitter duty to his followers.

The king stayed silent for a few moments. Dras and Rowe watched this scene curiously, and the Order Magisters waited to see what would happen.

"They're largely unpromised," Argrave hesitantly nodded. "And, indeed, you did defeat the loyalists. Duke Sumner was instrumental in purging that foul abomination," he gestured towards the Shadowlander. "This is acceptable. I can distribute lands seized lands in central Vasquer, provided these grants are based on genuine military merit."

Margrave Reinhardt glanced up in surprise, then lowered his head slowly. "Then I have nothing more to ask on the south's behalf, Your Majesty. But if I may make a personal request..." his head fell lower, until the margrave was practically kowtowing. "Please, heal my children as you healed Princess Elenore."

People watched the king for his reaction to that brazen request, and some were surprised to see he flashed a genuine smile. "Rose and Elias, huh? One eye and two legs... it'll be a little easier than Elenore, then. I can make that happen. It'll need to be relatively soon, though."

The margrave tremored, then said quietly, "...thank you, Your Majesty. I... have nothing more."

"Alright," Argrave nodded, then turned his body to the Magisters. "Then, Tower Master. Will the Order support my kingship?"

Some of the Magisters looked eager now that their turn had come to the negotiation table after that display of generosity. Castro looked back at Artur, who seemed the most expectant of them all. The wizened tower master craned his neck, popping it, then stepped ahead to stand before Elenore, Argrave, and the two sets of guards arrayed before the serpent Vasquer.

"The Order of the Gray Owl..." Castro began slowly. "*It* requests that all magical knowledge possessed by the royal family—be that of A-rank ascensions passed down, spells of any rank, or any and all knowledge of Order of the Rose ruins—are relinquished to the tower."

Argrave blinked, showing no reaction.

"Furthermore..." Castro closed his eyes, reciting these words strangely mechanically. "The Order desires all enchanted items kept by the royal family that are unknown. This consists of the royal guards armaments, all elven heirlooms, and any other such relics kept under its control. If these two things are delivered in totality, and an audit confirms this... the Order would offer its uncompromising support against the foul evil of Gerechtigkei."

The throne room grew silent, the only noise dominating being the breathing of the two giant reptiles in the room. Argrave watched Castro, then looked beyond at the Magisters who waited expectantly for his answer.

“No,” Argrave said calmly. “That is unacceptable.”