

King Argrave's unequivocal denial of the Order of the Gray Owl's terms sent the throne room into a brief silence. Castro, who'd been keeping his eyes closed and stating his demands mechanically, opened them wide. When the old spellcaster set eyes upon Argrave's cold gray eyes, a smile rose to his face. He quickly hid it with his hand until he regained control of his features.

"What about the offer was unacceptable, Your Majesty?" Castro followed up, hard-pressed to hide the pleasure in his voice.

"Most of it," Argrave settled down into a sitting position on the serpent Vasquer once again.

More silence followed in the stalemate that persisted between the king and the Magisters, and the nobles of the south watched on cautiously. Rowe and Dras continued to observe with interest, like they watched some kind of amusing play.

"Specificity might help allow all parties to come to a suitable compromise," Artur hovered closer from his sitting perch atop his magic mantle. He held both of his hands together, popping some of his knuckles rapidly.

"Well..." Argrave looked up to Anneliese, then back down to Artur. "You talked a lot about what the kingdom should do for you, but not any about what you intend to do for the kingdom that warrants those sacrifices. All of our enchantments? All of our knowledge? Why?"

Artur choked in awe briefly, then looked to Castro who had decided to remain silent. Gradually, the man's face settled into a cold, calculating calm as he continued, "The support of the Order of the Gray Owl's forces alone is—"

"Is guaranteed," Argrave interrupted monotonously. "Do you think Gerechtigkeits will respect your neutrality? Do you think the gods and their Divine Feudalism will see that giant tower of yours poking up miles into the air and come to the conclusion that it's off limits by law? Indeed, I can think of several gods that would love nothing more than pillaging everything that's inside. Then... it won't matter whether you supported me or not."

"The south received great stretches of land for their cooperation," Artur pointed out.

"Because they have already fought and died," the king said pointedly. "Besides, what am I going to do with land? For it to have value, there needs to be people to stand upon it, till the soil, and build the cities. If someone should be granted that right, why should it not be those who fought my enemies, and those who put down their swords when presented with reason?" Argrave shrugged.

Artur fiddled with one of the many rings on his fingers. "It would seem His Majesty favors the nobility over the Order. The Order, which housed you without protest when King Felipe III sought to take your head. Some might consider that a debt. A life debt, even."

"I have offered you representation in my parliament equal to that of the nobility and the burghers," Argrave said calmly, taking no provocation. "I have given your Magisters countless leads to vast troves of

treasure, some of which have already been collected. I can promise continued access to knowledge of that nature, provided the same is returned.”

Castro looked to Artur. “His Majesty has provided the Order with a significant quantity of druidic magic already. I see no reason to doubt why he cannot deliver more.”

“There is no reason to doubt,” Argrave added, nodding. “What can I give? Shamanic magic, or the secrets to the elven enchantments of old. I can offer the dwarven techniques of melding magic into metal, birthing weapons sharp enough to cut through things like that,” he pointed to the Shadowlander. “I can give you the secrets of the stone constructs of the subterranean people in the south, or the methods to rebirth eyes and limbs. But what the Order is asking for presently? It is unacceptable.”

Artur lowered his arms onto his wreathing mantle, and it appeared like the small man was sat atop a throne. “You have all of these things you mention?”

“Some,” Argrave nodded. “Others I can obtain in short order. You’ve seen my directions.” Argrave gestured to those who’d spoken earlier about their expeditions to various places of proof. “All of you must know that what I say is largely accurate.”

A great many of the Magisters did seem enticed by all of what Argrave promised, while others yet remained hardened to the notion—most of all Artur.

“We should break the founding principle of Order neutrality based on promises?” Artur said pointedly.

Argrave grew silent, shifting his legs from his spot atop Vasquer. After he mulled the question, he declared simply, “Yes.”

“Haha!” Artur laughed with derision. “The Order of the Rose was the last spellcaster order to be a subsidiary to the crown. They butchered perhaps a dozen million people throughout their existence in cruel practices of necromancy and blood magic. They proved that a king cannot be trusted with direct sovereignty over a group of mages. Even if Your Majesty understands the dangers and powers of magic, your successors will not.”

Argrave listened patiently, then nodded. “That’s a fair point. Then how is this: let this breach be an exception rather than a change. The Order can remain a separate institution, but cooperation must be maintained for extenuating circumstances: namely, Gerechtigkei.”

Artur was briefly deflated, but he countered, “By then, you’d have all the knowledge of the Order at hand.”

The king let out a long sigh. “I think that a demonstration is in order. Rowe, cast an S-rank spell at the Shadowlander’s corpse.”

Rowe looked to Patriarch Dras, who gave him a nod. People looked at the Veidimen uneasily.

“I’d advise everyone step back,” Rowe called out. “I would hate to sour a burgeoning alliance.”

People did so quickly, and Rowe stepped to the edge of his Crystal Wind’s snout. He held his hand out, and an ice-blue mana ripple split the air, sending teal sprites dancing everywhere. His spell manifested in a quickly condensing icy spiral. Argrave leaned in.

The ice quickly condensed into a long, thick spear with a sharp point. When Rowe pushed his hand forth, it spiked forth, spinning so fast that the wind it generated picked up loose pebbles and sent them everywhere. It drilled into the Shadowlander's body furiously, pinning it against the pillar it was secured against. The whole throne room shook as it bore deep into its flesh, and bits from the ceiling fell down.

Yet even still... the Shadowlander's body persisted. As it spun rapidly the spear of ice wore itself down, steadily decreasing in size as it grinded down into nothingness. Even Rowe, who'd cast the spell, looked utterly surprised at the resistance.

By the time its intense power died and the last bit of ice faded, the S-rank spellcaster muttered, "The damn thing didn't...?"

"That was [Winter's Awl], wasn't it?" the king nodded, staring at the damage done—it had dug through the flesh to bone, and then stopped after digging through perhaps an inch. "A spell designed for boring through just about anything—mountains, walls, or an entire enemy line." Argrave placed his hands on his knees and leaned in slightly. "Does anyone else care to test its body?"

No one stepped forward.

"If you think you're indomitable and invaluable because you're an S-rank mage... that's a bad mindset," Argrave leaned back. "The world changes. You need to change with it."

Whether they were distraught, offended, or frightened... those last words stuck deep in the heart of the Magisters present.

"Brother," Elenore called out. "Given all that was revealed, and the evidence that needs to be distributed... I believe we should reconvene tomorrow to finish this, whereupon we can delve into specifics."

"My sister has a point," Argrave nodded. "All of you have much to think and talk about, so we'll return here tomorrow. You can stay within or without Dirracha—you'll be welcome in either."

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Argrave flopped onto a bed, staring up at the ceiling in exhaustion with Anneliese in his peripheries. She stepped up to him and said, "That's a rather unkinglike position."

He smiled at her teasing and took her hand. He couldn't recall when last he'd been so nervous. To begin with, he'd been standing atop Vasquer's head as all the important people filtering in, enduring the biting cold and fierce winds atop the Dragon Palace all for the sake of appearing in an unexpected and surprising manner. He felt like some kind of cartoon villain, descending on a snake's head with a crown on his head. It was very difficult to remain cool and collected after that display. It was doubly difficult to keep his voice from shaking when he was both freezing and deathly worried about mucking up this once-in-a-lifetime resolution of a civil war.

"You did well," Anneliese assured him.

Argrave focused on her. "I have to wait a day for the resolution. Even if you're right, I am very far from feeling well."

The concept behind what Argrave did was simple. Even if Castro was the leader of the council in the Order, he was still subject to it. In planning with Anneliese and Elenore, they devised this strategy that hoped to eliminate choices with a blunt refusal. With an option taken off the table, it would ideally allow Castro to better guide his people towards a favorable outcome.

It had another effect: precedent of leadership. Argrave had been reasonable with the south, as they asked for reasonable returns. But if he was to be an effective leader, especially when he established a parliament, he also had to be unyielding in the face of things that were negative to the realm. The parliament would be a net positive for the future, Argrave was certain: simultaneously, until Gerechtigkei was over and done, he could not allow it to control him. There was nothing more demonstrative of the fact he would not be a puppet than defying dozens of S-rank spellcasters.

Anneliese sat beside him. "Come now. We have to meet the patriarch once again."

Argrave let out a long sigh. He felt like he'd done that a lot today.

"I have confidence in Castro and Elenore working in tandem to subjugate the Order," Anneliese said quietly. "And many of the Magisters have had a thorough demonstration of the breadth of your knowledge when venturing to parts unknown with only your writing as their guide."

"...yeah," he whispered tiredly, then leaned up. He shook his head fiercely to wake himself up. "Alright. From one negotiation to another one—the Veidimen. Let's go, damn it all. To Rowe, to Dras. How much are they going to charge, I wonder..."

Anneliese stood. "I think that you will be pleasantly surprised. Our sensibilities regarding selfishness are different in Veiden; you probably won't call this a negotiation, even. And hopefully... Galamon will get something out of this reunion, too."

Argrave looked at her, then rose to his feet with renewed energy and a smile at the prospect of reuniting two friends. "I had almost forgotten... Galamon gets to meet old friends of his."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 347: Guests from the Motherland**

Galamon opened the door for Argrave and stepped through it ahead of him. Argrave followed after warily, keeping his eye on the knight-commander as though searching for a reaction. Within, Rowe and Dras sat on pristine purple couches that looked out of place in the battered and worn stone palace. They had been talking, but with Argrave's arrival their exchange stopped.

"There he is." Rowe turned his body and rose to his feet, leaning on his staff. "I see you had to upstage me by bringing a bigger lizard to the meeting."

"Lizard? That's my grandmother you're talking about. Be respectful." Argrave rubbed his palms together, making way for Anneliese to enter. "Rowe. Dras. It's good to see you."

Rowe scoffed. "Look at him. He wins a war, now suddenly he's ordering me about in front of everyone and forgetting the patriarch's title. I suppose that's what happens when you're the tallest among the short. I forgot how small everyone was here... and before you think otherwise, I'm not speaking of height."

As they spoke, Dras rose from the couch and stepped around it, walking up to Galamon. The knight-commander took off his helmet and looked down at the slightly shorter Dras.

Galamon said simply, "Patriarch."

"Over a decade, and that's all you can say?" Dras stared at him stoically, then he smiled. "Haven't changed a bit, have you?"

"I have." Galamon looked to Argrave. "I've... been liberated."

Dras frowned for a moment, then looked to Argrave for explanation. To demonstrate to the patriarch, the king tapped his teeth.

"What?" Dras whipped his head back. "You're serious?"

Argrave pointed to Galamon. "He doesn't joke often."

"But that has never been done before." Rowe stepped forward, looking upon Galamon. "Smile, would you? You know how to do that, right?"

Galamon slowly brandished his teeth. He had sharp canines still, but certainly not to the point of vampirism.

"I..." Dras closed his eyes. "By Veid. This..." He ran his hand across his mouth. "When you came to me, I thought you nothing more than a messenger liable to die months after our ships delivered you home," he said, turning to gaze to Argrave as he spoke. "I have more to say to you, but... Rowe, please brief Argrave on the details. As for Galamon... can we talk? Alone."

Galamon said plainly, "I am knight-commander to His Majesty."

"And you are defenseless as knight-commander before me, so go," Rowe waved his hand.

Galamon did not move at all until Argrave said, "You can talk with him if you want to, Galamon."

The elven warrior took a deep breath. "Then... thank you."

Dras put his hand on Galamon's shoulder, and the two moved to the door so that they might speak in private.

Once the door had opened and shut, Argrave turned his head to the remaining guest in the home—Rowe the Righteous, S-rank spellcaster. "Shouldn't you make sure your patriarch's safe?"

"What am I, his father?" Rowe stepped away, heading back for the purple couches. "He's got enough magic-imbued jewelry to kill an army, and a trick or two besides. You should have seen what happened after enchanting was introduced to my lot. All the wizards of Veiden lined up, bent their knees, and demonstrated their latest enchanting craftsmanship while delivering their best brownnosing compliments." Rowe plopped down on the couch, then fixed Argrave and Anneliese with an icy look. "Either way, don't you have control over your troops, *Your Majesty*? No harm will befall my glorious leader, *surely*."

Argrave walked over to the couch opposite Rowe and sat. "It's not my troops I'm concerned about."

“Ah yes, the little rats in this granary of yours. There’s something to be said about your kind’s ability to be self-interested even when the sky threatens to fall on their heads,” Rowe set his staff down and put his feet up on the couch just beside Argrave.

Argrave only smiled. “It’s only some of them. I gave them the push, and I think they’ll bend. They don’t know the extent of what’s coming, not really. Even that little vision imparted to them by the stone disc Castro got is insufficient. Should you whip a child that misbehaves because of ignorance?” Argrave held his hands out, eyeing Rowe. “Don’t answer that. I forgot who I was talking to.”

“A child? No one there was younger than you,” Rowe said as he laughed, watching Anneliese as she sat. “Speaking of children... the two of you, hmm? You can’t actually like humans too much, judging by your choice of partner.”

Argrave put his arm behind Anneliese on the couch as they both only smiled, saying nothing further on the subject.

Rowe’s expression slowly soured into a grim stoicism. “Neither of you died.”

Anneliese quipped, “You were always quick to grasp the situation, Rowe.”

“And both of you exceeded what I thought would happen, be it magically or...” Rowe waved to the palace and everything around them. “Materially.”

Argrave nodded. “Hard times create strong people.”

“Nothing is more maddening than seeing someone I think far dumber than me doing far better than me,” Rowe stared at Argrave. “What is it with you? Did you eat magic berries? Was your mother some kind of mutant? You should not reasonably advance so quickly on the field of magic.”

Argrave chuckled, then pointed his thumb at Anneliese. “She’s the real giant among pygmies. Anne’s at A-rank already, you know.”

Rowe looked at her. “Eh. I expected her to do great things. Sometimes you talk to people and you just know they’re going places. But you...” Rowe stared hard, the cynical wizard replaced by Patriarch Dras’ loyal servant doing his duty to his tribe. “Assuming you consolidate this uselessly large and fertile kingdom of yours... what next?”

“Prepare,” Anneliese said on his behalf. “Spread word among the people. Change their way of living to adapt for what comes before necessary. Build the fortifications needed to hold and defend. Position all loyal to us to capitalize on benefits, and ruthlessly crush opposition spurred by Gerechtigkeits.” She entwined her fingers. “All of that was Argrave’s idea, not mine. I would appreciate it if you did not disparage his talent.”

“His idea? That would explain the inadequate reasoning,” he said, taking his feet off the couch and planting them down firmly on the floor. Seeing Anneliese glare at him with fiery amber eyes, Rowe added in annoyance, “It’s a joke, girl. That one was, at least. I meant what I said earlier.”

Before things got out of hand Argrave interrupted, “Dras said he had something he wanted you to debrief us on.”

“Well, things in Veiden haven’t been easy. While we don’t think it’s to the point of asking for help... we would like to ask for advice.” Rowe said those words bitterly, and then hesitantly continued, “He Who Would Judge the Gods is unfond of allowing us time to sharpen our blades and work our spells. And I think the same will be true for you, too. We have an interest in working together. I won’t wring you dry, either, unlike your *loyal subjects*. Don’t you just love elvenkind?”

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“I never thought we’d speak again,” mused Dras as he and Galamon walked down the battered halls of the Dragon Palace. “We said our goodbyes.”

“We did.” Galamon nodded, then looked to the patriarch. “My wife and Rhomaden...”

“Not a thought to spare for me?” Dras scratched the top of his bald, scarred head. “They’re fine, as far as I know. Things keep me too busy to check on them more than once a month. Perhaps you’d like to come visit them for yourself.”

Galamon stopped walking, and Dras looked back.

“What?” the patriarch asked.

Galamon stared with his cold white eyes. “I was exiled.”

“You’d be tested in the old way—tied to an iron pole and left there for three days in the sun.” Dras stepped closer. “And if that’s done in the view of all... no one would protest if I lifted your exile. You’d clearly be free of the stain of vampirism.”

“The exile was done before Veid.” Galamon looked down at Dras unaffectedly.

Dras stared back. “Exiles have been undone.”

“Undone for the innocent. I was cursed, incontrovertibly.” Galamon reminded him.

“You *were*,” the patriarch nodded, then stepped forth. “Your homeland needs you, Galamon. Stopping the Veidimen conquest of Berendar has not come at an easy price. A swung sword suddenly stopped hurts the arm; you taught me that.” Dras looked around, then stepped closer. “I’m not complaining. I did not err in heeding Argrave’s warnings. But I cannot teach men and women as you can. I cannot instill that sense of duty and pride to the army.”

“Tens of thousands were dying of starvation before you came and made what changes you did,” the knight-commander defended his former master. “You unified us and built an enviable empire.”

“No.” Dras shook his head. “We did that. You don’t need to prop me up, old friend. I have pride enough for the both of us, but I know my limits all the same. I could not have won that war without your ferocity and strategy. And now... I need it once more. He Who Would Judge the Gods is not idle, and now that we know of him, he is bold. I’m half-convinced he aided me in conquest and the subsequent invasion of Berendar to destabilize this continent, but I fear that might be my paranoia.”

Galamon closed his eyes and clenched his hands together until the metal gauntlets he wore creaked in protest. “You know I want nothing more than to go home.”

Dras nodded. "But you have obligations."

"Yes." Galamon looked off to the side, where a window let in dim light. "Argrave needs me. If I built your army back then, I must do the same here. And our foe is not so simple this time. You saw what Rowe's attack did. I saw that same spell remove the top from a mountain in our battles of old, yet that thing's body held firm. *That* is what we fight."

Dras tilted his head. "Even if the Ebon Cult has resurfaced?"

Galamon's heavy and quick steps shook the ground, and Dras took a step back as Galamon towered over him. "Do not toy with me by bringing up that name."

Dras chuckled nervously, hands hovering near Galamon's chest. "There's no damning evidence, but I swear I'm being honest. I would not mention your brother's killers without having ample evidence to believe it's so."

Galamon ground his teeth for a few moments, then turned away as quickly as he had come. Dras rubbed his chest and muttered, "Still scary."

"I... apologize," said Galamon after a few moments.

"Well, how sorry are you?" Dras questioned cheekily.

Galamon walked to the window and looked out across Dirracha. "We should involve Argrave in this conversation," he finally said.

Patriarch Dras took a deep breath. "Alright. I guess it was inevitable."

"I've heard some strange mutterings from the southern nobles." Galamon turned around. "If you want my cooperation... I think you have a daughter, now."

Dras blinked in confusion.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 348: The Little Things**

"As it turns out... I was right the entire time," the brown-haired Duke Sumner said with dignified triumph as he looked out across all the nobles of the south arrayed before him. "Argrave *was* allied with the Veidimen."

"But wrong in all the ways that mattered." Margrave Reinhardt, who was standing across from the duke, rebutted. "The snow elves come as our allies, not conquerors."

A great many sat and parsed through documents, some Veidimen in origin, and many others brought by those in the Order of the Gray Owl. They looked confused and disturbed, as though what they read was some sort of abominable horror fiction. They feared. And the more they read, the more that fear felt justified.

Count Delbraun ran his hands through his ashen hair as he suggested, "That woman behind the king... she must be that dragon rider's daughter. It explains how the invasion of Mateth ended." He looked between all present.



"You're already calling him king." Duke Reichard of Birall looked up from what he read. He was a rather unassuming and shrewish man that seemed out of place amongst great warriors and spellcasters that comprised the southern nobility.

"Do you think we can afford not to? These snow elves are fierce warriors. As a mage, I can attest that the spell cast was powerful beyond belief." Delbraun rebuked as he stepped away to the window. "But even despite that alliance... that's not the extent of his forces."

The count pranced about the room as he thought aloud. "Making Relize fold, destabilizing Atrus with his brother Levin's help, and winning all of the far north to his banner... it was masterfully executed. This bid for the throne was probably years in the making. And all for this prophecy. I never thought myself superstitious, and yet... perhaps the great serpent Vasquer chose him."

"This outcome may have been more organic than that. Why not simply tell his father?" Duke Reichard suggested.

"I heard a rumor," Elias of Parbon spoke up, his one good eye jumping between the two of them. "That the creature in the throne room... that was King Felipe's true form. That would explain the drastic change in personality, the years of misrule... and why Argrave couldn't trust his family for this. His father had already succumbed to Gerechtigkei."

Margrave Reinhardt frowned. "Why would Argrave not simply say that?"

"I can think of a dozen reasons why a son wouldn't want to portray their father as a demon." Delbraun shook his head. "And it's beside the point. We have a new king... and a queen, an elven princess of sorts."

"I'm not sure..." Margrave Reinhardt closed his eyes. "I met them once before. He loves her, I'm certain. It did not seem an arranged marriage."

"He's sensible," Duke Sumner nodded. "Incredibly talented, pretty enough, and of high pedigree; can you ask of more from a woman? Anyone with decent sense would realize the good hand they've been dealt and avoid mucking that up. Our new king is sensible."

"But they were on a dangerous journey," Reinhardt pointed out.

"We're speculating from ignorance." Delbraun turned to them. "Our new king is poised to be the most powerful monarch in Vasquer's history. That was my point."

"But he's been even-handed," the previously reticent Duke Marauch spoke up.

The room grew silent, all staring to look at the duke. Some of them didn't recognize the man: they remembered the Duke of Elbraille being a fat and battered husband, nothing more.

"He's right." Duke Sumner looked around. "And... he doesn't want to position the crown as an absolute power forevermore. That's what this parliament of his is: ensuring that what happened with Felipe can never happen again. And ensuring that we, the people of Vasquer, can confirm the monarch... what is that if not a tacit display of goodwill towards the kingdom?"

People slowly agreed. Elias of Parbon said plainly, "Gerechtigkei or not... I'm in full favor."

That sentiment was echoed more than it was not. Eventually, someone raised a drink.

“To Argrave,” the woman suggested.

“The even-handed.” Duke Sumner retrieved his own glassware and clinked it against hers. “May the gods save us all from whatever comes...”

Some people joined in cheer, but it did little to dispel the gloom of learning of the approaching calamity. Margrave Reinhardt stepped away, moving to the window. His son joined him.

“Thinking about Rose?” Elias asked. “I want nothing more than to break down the door and find Argrave, but...”

“In time. He made a pledge before all. That will not be forgotten.” Reinhardt nodded. “And yet... Duke Enrico still languishes in Whitefields.”

Elias joined his father in peering out across the city, the two of them lost in the silence of unending worry.

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“You would just fold before him?!” Artur angrily accused Castro, leaning forth on his billowing throne of cloth that floated in the air.

“Fold?” Castro replied, remaining calm. “I applied as much pressure as I could in this situation. I pressed for what the council wanted, to the word. And His Majesty refused.”

Artur leaned back. His eyes seemed to shimmer, moving between colors as the light danced across the room unnaturally. Castro narrowed his eyes, almost daring the small man to do something.

Eventually, Artur gripped his mantle tight as he claimed, “You said more words in support of Argrave than words in support of the Order.”

“Are you implying I didn’t act in accordance with the Order’s interests?” Castro took a step forward.

“Say what you will of my personal allegiances, but never let it be said that I do not heed what the Order votes upon. I have done things I found undeserving *for the Order*, and I have passed edicts I found distasteful *for the Order*. But I did all of that in service of our organization, because I fully believe that this institution serves as a force for good in this world.”

Artur closed his shimmering eyes and took slow, deep breaths. The other Magisters looked between them—the only ones that did not seem to be paying attention were Vera and Hegazar, who muttered in the corner while looking at the cracks in the walls and ceiling.

“You’re right,” the dwarf finally conceded calmly. “You invited Argrave to your room because of your adherence to Order neutrality. You visited Mateth to see him because of that adherence. And you made Magisters heed his directions because of this strong commitment to this organization’s principles.”

“Once again, you imply my personal beliefs are influencing the way I represent the Order. If I had, I would not have even mentioned the greedy practices we voted for.” Castro shook his head, then popped his neck as though this conversation was inconsequential.

"The effect is the same as though you had," Artur pointed out, laying down on his mantle by this point. "The option is off the table for us."

"You act as small as you are," Moriattran stepped forward until he stood beside the Tower Master. "I hate Castro more than anyone, but I don't think he's acted out of turn as a leader. There's only you. I am near positive most others would not have voted for this foolish initiative if not for you, Artur. They all feared to lose access to your enchantments. They all feared making an enemy of you."

Artur lifted his head up, utterly incensed at the insult Moriattran levelled. His eyes wandered, looking around at the other Magisters. They refused to meet his gaze, he found. No matter where he looked... he found no support anywhere. They all looked at him like an arrogant fool... those few that did look at him, at least.

"I..." Artur closed his eyes. "Hah. I see. Now that Argrave's made promises, you think I'm useless to you. You won't care if my services are blocked to you, because you've found someone else to offer sweet things. You've been waiting for a moment like this to finally toss me aside."

"If you cooperate, you can learn all you need to advance with us," suggested Castro. "You know enchantments better than anyone. You can learn what Argrave offers first and change with the times. Whether the tide is high or low, you must keep swimming. You must know this, having endured all you have."

"You're wasting your words on an egomaniac," Moriattran pointed out as Artur opened his mouth to respond.

"Moriattran..." Castro put his palm to his face.

"Forget that. Let him taste his medicine," Hegazar called out from the back, standing up. "The moron's been wearing stilts long enough that he's forgotten he's not really ten feet tall. It's about time he knows where he stands, I'd say. And that's a couple feet shorter than the rest of us."

Vera and some others laughed, and many others were amused and did not bother to hide it.

"Hegazar." Castro's voice echoed out powerfully.

"I'm just kidding about," Hegazar stepped a little closer until he came to stand with the rest of them.

"Look. Argrave—he's a devious guy, but if you do right by him, he'll do right by you. He trapped my lady friend over there in a vault: she got over it. Don't be too upset you got the short end of the stick. Cheer up, little guy."

Hegazar tried to pat him on the knee as people shook their head at his puns, but Artur's mantle moved the man aside. When he looked upon Hegazar, Castro, and the rest, his once light-filled eyes were completely dark.

"Don't get all mad," Hegazar said, holding his arms out. "You're just a little more down to earth than the rest of us. No one's looking down on you, you just have a little growing up to do."

Vera laughed rancorously, and some others joined her in catharsis. Artur's eyes scanned the room, unblinking in their stoicism.

When things died down, Artur's voice spoke up, quiet and monotone. "I'll accede to Argrave's request, then."

Castro stared at the man with dwarfism. He was one of the few who had not laughed. Then, he gave a slow nod. "It's the right thing."

Artur only stared. He watched Castro and all others in the room, as though burning them to memory.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 349: A Malleable People**

Argrave crossed his arms as he stared at Dras. "You're poaching my talent? Really?"

Dras held his arms out as he sunk back into the purple couch. "I'm borrowing an old friend for a few months."

"A few months." Argrave nodded intently, then countered, "Just when I'm at the pivotal moment, you want to borrow Galamon for at least a month?" he pointed his hand at Galamon. "He's my knight-commander! He's pivotal for developing our standing army! As much as I want him to see his wife and kid..."

Dras pursed his lips for a moment as he looked for a response, but then Galamon contributed, "That's not true. You know as well as I do that the first month, at *least*, will be dedicated to reorganization. It'll be a long while before there's mass training in Vasquer." He looked to the patriarch. "And there are some things the patriarch offered to supply."

The patriarch looked up to Galamon from his seat. "Are you keeping distance between us by calling me 'patriarch,' huh? How hurtful. Don't intend to rejoin me in a more permanent fashion?" He waved his hand away. "Well... yeah. Galamon tells me this royal guard of yours is understaffed. I'm thinking... I can supply you with an honor guard of my finest men, loyal to you until their death. These would be veterans trained by Galamon personally and equipped with enough Ebonice to choke a dragon."

"They'd be capable men," Galamon added. "Capable of holding their own, or capable of training others. I can think of veterans that I know that I would trust to serve as officers beneath me," he noted, tapping his chest. "These men have fought in wars for seventy years, some of them. And they're still well in their prime."

"It's been more than a decade. That might not be true," Rowe pointed out. When Dras glared at him, the old mage quickly added, "But yeah, Galamon's right. They can train your troops, lead your armies, whatever you need. They're perfect in every way. That enough of an endorsement?" he looked at Dras in irritation.

"While I'm away, there's a more-than-fitting replacement for your personal guard: Orion." Galamon gestured at Argrave and Anneliese both. "He would never harm his family. He visits his mother daily."

Argrave's face tightened for a moment as he thought of it. "How many men?"

"Three hundred." Dras put his hands on his knees.

Argrave leaned back onto the couch. Three hundred Veidimen, each and all trained by Galamon, equipped with Ebonice... and in time, each and all outfitted just as the royal knights of Vasquer. He

looked at Anneliese, the two of them sharing the same thought: *that* was truly a boon. Not to mention, Galamon personally endorsed them. Argrave's thoughts clogged as he processed something.

Argrave looked at his knight-commander. "It sounds like you're championing this."

Galamon looked down at the floor. "He hasn't said everything."

Dras scratched his scarred head. "I would also adopt Anneliese as my daughter."

Argrave leaned far back into the couch in surprise, then looked over at her. Her white brows were raised high and she sputtered as she asked, "W-what?"

"It'd be a big boon for the two of you, politically speaking. All those beneath you would feel confident in your alliance, and you'd likely face no political pressure." Dras' gaze jumped between the two of them. "For my part, it's largely inconsequential. I suppose you get a solid stake in the Patriarchate when I pass, but historically chiefs are elected from all the family members, so it doesn't matter. I'm planning on making my succession a grander electorate consisting of all Veidimen. That's one virtue of conquest: you can make up new rules."

"Well... I would..." Anneliese began. Even she struggled to find words in this situation.

"As my kin, you'd be second in the tribal hierarchy. The only person who could order you around is me. You could even order Rowe around," Dras put his hand on the man's shoulder, and the S-rank spellcaster frowned. "I think it matches well with this honor guard I'd be sending. It's a good justification for welcoming them into your ranks."

"You really value Galamon a lot, huh? You'd offer this much from the get-go." Argrave leaned in closer.

"Well..." Dras scratched his cheek. "It's one thing to have an emissary of the Hand Reaching from the Abyss come to Veiden. It is another entirely if that man is king of the nation, there. I do not care to make an enemy of you. There are other lands beside this continent of Berendar."

Argrave was pleased, and about to comment on the idea of lasting peace. Before he did, someone else spoke.

"It was your idea, was it not? This adoption?" Anneliese looked at Galamon.

The big man closed his eyes and looked away, saying nothing. Argrave was shocked. He didn't know the old man had it in him to be this conniving. Maybe Argrave was rubbing off on him, teaching him the virtues of extorting friends and relatives.

"So, what do you think?" Dras held his hands out. "Is this a good enough trade?"

Argrave looked to Anneliese. "I would never decide for her."

Dras looked a little surprised, but then he looked to Anneliese for his answer.

"I need not think for more than a heartbeat," Anneliese said. "Of course."

The patriarch nodded as though it was expected. "Then, Argrave?"

“Well...” Argrave looked to Galamon. “Good lord. I guess I’m selling my friend for three hundred men and a father-in-law. Sounds like the start to a joke, but...” he held out his hand for a handshake. “Take good care of him. He’s high maintenance. Whines a lot.”

Dras chuckled and took Argrave’s hand. “Yeah. I remember it well. He yapped my ear off in the past.”

The two laughed as both looked at Galamon. Then, in a rare show... the man smiled slightly. It was slight enough no one took notice.

#####

The next day, Argrave appeared before the nobles of the south, the allied representatives of both the north and Veiden, and the Order of the Gray Owl. He came in on foot, this time. Vasquer was still in the room, but Patriarch Dras and Rowe walked as well. Rowe left his druidic bond to roost atop the Dragon Palace. It would be ridiculously uncomfortable to negotiate on the back of a snake’s head, and things promised to be long and meticulous today.

Argrave took his place on the throne. It was cushioned, warm... already a much better start than yesterday.

Reinhardt was the first to step forward. He kneeled. “We’ve read through the great majority of what was delivered to us,” the margrave began. “The decision of those beneath me is unanimous. With the conditions offered yesterday... we would all be glad to welcome you as king, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Good!” Argrave said, tapping the armrest of the throne. He felt that this result was the most assured, but he was still glad to hear it. “I am happy to have the whole of you as my vassals, too. Elenore can handle the details of the ceremony of fealty—you can speak to her after. And on the other note... Elias, Rose, that promise I made... she’ll send you to talk to me after this summit is done, today. We can talk about getting the both of them healed.”

Margrave Reinhardt lowered his head almost to the ground. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Argrave felt a bit strange seeing a man that had held him captive some months ago kneeling before him and calling him king, and he stared for a few moments. Anneliese tapped his shoulder, drawing him back to attention.

Argrave turned his gaze, drawn from his haze. “So, Castro. Have you and your people had time to think about things, come to a conclusion?”

The tower master stepped away from his crowd. “We submit to Your Majesty’s terms,” Castro lowered his head. “The Order will collaborate with the crown’s wishes. I cannot speak to what each individual will do in way of support, but if Your Majesty offers seats on the parliament, I am sure many will be glad to take them. We will grant access to our knowledge as needed. For my part, I will... greatly incentivize detailed cooperation with the crown, but each member of the Order is not bound to it.” The old man dipped his head. “I hope Your Majesty recognizes this.”

“Of course I do. I benefited from Order neutrality, and so I’d be a fool to infringe upon it.” Argrave nodded. “We’ll have to discuss how people might be rewarded for cooperating with the crown. I have my own set of incentives that might draw people to offer aid. But... I’m glad that your people came around. I can assure all that you will gain much if you offer faithful service.”

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed with a smile playing about his lips, pleased that things had gone so well. He spotted the Magister afflicted with dwarfism in their bunch, but he didn't see resentment in his gaze. Deciding to shelve the matter, he looked to Anneliese and then Elenore, giving each a light nod in turn.

"Excellent. I'm glad to put that behind us. I do intend to get to the specifics of how the parliament will play out, but there's another matter. Namely, our allies the Veidimen." Argrave looked to Dras.

The patriarch held his hands behind his back and stood straight. "Argrave will marry my daughter in one month. An honor guard and dowry will be sent overseas to guard and protect her. This will signal the beginning of a long and fruitful alliance between our two peoples so that we might struggle against He Who Would Judge the Gods."

The southern nobles stirred at this news, but the reaction could be said to be largely positive. After the arrival of a dragon, the display with Rowe's magic, and the sheer physical size of the Veidimen, few wanted to make genuine enemies of the snow elves.

Argrave nodded. "I want no bad blood, no enmity. I saw lynchings of Veidimen at Mateth after the invasion. If anything that barbaric occurs again..." Argrave's gaze went to the Shadowlander staked to the wall, crucified. He stared for a long while. When he finally looked away, people had gotten the message.

"Good!" Argrave said loudly, gently slamming the armrest. "Elenore, you take the floor. She's to be named the first Head of Parliament. Thereafter, it'll be an elected position, the time in office being eight years. Let's discuss the finer details..."

#####

Elenore wrote quickly on a piece of paper, working by the light of a magic lamp on her desk. This room had a balcony, and Vasquer had rested her head just behind Elenore. The snake's golden eyes gleamed in the darkness.

Elenore's desk shook lightly, and she looked up. She leaned back suddenly when the door burst open. Orion stepped inside, then shut the door and looked at her.

"What is it?" Elenore put her writing instrument down.

Orion stepped to her desk, saying nothing.

"I'm busy with Whitefields, and now this business with the parliament. Get to the point, Orion," she waved her hand to hurry him along. "If you're here to visit Vasquer, she's right there. Just be quiet. I need to focus."

"It was you," Orion said quietly. "That rumor about Felipe. About him being that Shadowlander that devastated the city."

Elenore tapped the desk a couple times, then said boldly, "So what?"

"So what?" Orion put his hands on the desk and leaned down. "My mother heard it. My *mother*," he repeated. "She thinks her husband became a demon. She was mentally wounded enough before, but *now*?"

"I'm at a pivotal point in the situation with Whitefields. I don't need this right now," Elenore shook her head.

Orion stood there, unmoving. "We need to talk. Not you and me." He looked up at Vasquer. "All of us, as a family. All of what remains of this bloodline."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 350: Dynastic Troubles**

"I know that it might seem ridiculous," Argrave said, one hand hovering near the other which held a wriggling salamander. "But these things... they're the key."

Reinhardt shook his head. "We're the ones to ask you for help, Your Majesty. Why would we doubt what you do?"

Argrave looked down at the margrave. It had been perhaps three or four months since last they spoke, and now the situations between them had reversed entirely. It was a very strange thing to see Margrave Reinhardt and think of the past. That point of comparison struck home how much had changed. Argrave had done a lot. Some of it was worse than in Heroes of Berendar, and some of it was far better.

"Your Majesty?" Elias asked politely.

Argrave was drawn from his thoughts. "You'll have two options. The first is to eat these things, daily..." he began.

Argrave explained the intricacies of the process to the two members of House Parbon, calling upon Anneliese to relay her experiences treating Elenore when necessary. When it was done he asked, "Any questions?"

"None." Reinhardt shook his head.

"Good. Then, these things aren't immortal. You'll want to get this over with quickly." Argrave looked down at the salamander. "You'll either want your wyvern, or you'll want to leave now. I'm curious where it is."

Reinhardt looked instinctually defensive. "It's... safe."

Argrave smiled at the margrave's paranoia. As he stared, he heard a knock on the door. Galamon, who was still acting as his knight-commander for now, stepped to the door and opened it up.

"I need your help," Elenore said, her voice entering the room before she did.

"That's rare. What is it?" Argrave tossed the salamander at Elias, and the one-eyed man grappled with it frantically in his surprise. "If there's nothing else, margrave..."

"Nothing more, Your Majesty." The man dipped his head respectfully, and his mane of red hair covered his face.

Argrave bit his lip, reminded once again of how much he enjoyed being undercover in the far north. It was hard to make fun of someone when they treated him like a king. It felt unfair. He turned to Elenore, and then he and his entourage walked out.



"You looked distressed," Anneliese noted at once, and they walked down the hall following the princess' fast pace.

"I have news," Elenore began. "Rovostar... he's abandoned his forces. On the bright side, they've surrendered to us and sent his family as hostages. His eldest son was killed while resisting." She looked at him, gray eyes somewhat bright. "No more armies oppose you."

Argrave raised a brow. "I only care about Duke Enrico by this point."

"That's the thing." Elenore crossed her arms as she walked. "Rovostar took Duke Enrico with him alongside his small force. They marched right past Blackgard and Relize—the garrisons tried to stop them, but they travelled light and our sallying defenders were unable to even wound any of them. They have a spellcaster with them, I'm told. Last word I got... they're headed for the Bloodwoods. It might be they enter, or it might be they look for a way out of this."

Argrave sighed and placed his palm against his face. "I can't... good lord. I knew I should have acted personally..." When he thought of what he might say to explain things to his cousin, he quickly asked, "What about Nikoletta?"

"We did find her," Elenore nodded. "She was injured chasing after Rovostar's party. She's taking respite at Blackgard with another—Mina of Veiden. Her wounds are already healed, but the garrison is retaining her. For her own safety," Elenore added positively.

Argrave nodded. "We're due to head to Blackgard again soon, anyway. Damn it all. Everything was going so well..." he looked to Elenore. "What did you need my help with? Where are we going?"

Elenore sighed. "We're here."

She opened the door, then moved into the room. Argrave saw Orion sitting on the left, Vasquer situated on the balcony, and Elenore moved to sit opposite Orion. Vasquer barely fit: it was extremely evident that she needed much more room generally. Argrave looked about the room, perplexed.

"Have a seat, Argrave," Orion gestured to a couch. "We'd like to talk."

Argrave furrowed his brows. "Is this... an intervention? What'd I do?"

Elenore gestured her hand at Orion. "This man has been bothering me *ceaselessly*. He insists that we all should meet as a family."

"Vasquer agrees with me," Orion said defensively. "A good family is open and communicative. That's what she told me. I insist we meet monthly, to update the others on what we're doing, and to air any grievances."

Argrave leaned up against the doorframe, feeling a bit dizzy. Even here, he could not escape forced family fun.

"Come on, have a seat," Orion repeated, pointing. "You as well, Lady Anneliese. This is important."

Argrave hesitantly dislodged himself from the doorframe and walked over to the couch between Elenore and Orion, and then sat until he sunk into the cushions. He stared at Vasquer as she fit awkwardly into the room. Galamon shut the door as Anneliese sat beside him.

"Alright," Orion said happily, running one hand over his beard. "I'll start."

"Wait," Argrave raised his hand. "Why don't we just get mutual understanding through Vasquer?"

"She cannot be everywhere," Orion pointed. "She cannot travel as she used to. Her body is old and ailing. It was trouble enough for her to move from the underground position after years of suffering. We have to develop these family skills *now*."

Argrave sunk further into the couch, then fiddled with his ring as he stared off into space. The silence persisted for a few seconds.

"Alright," Orion said. "Then... I'll start."

"Why are we wasting time with this whole ordeal?" Elenore interrupted. "All of this is just a pretext to moralize about the fact I'm disparaging our dead father. I don't care, and you can't convince me to care. Don't bother."

"No, I want to know *why* you don't care. This is about understanding," insisted Orion.

Argrave sunk a little further into the couch, fiddling with his ring faster. He looked up at Vasquer, pleading for her aid.

Elenore scoffed. "You don't even know what you want. All of this nonsense about family—I don't want to hear it. You were father's lapdog for years, jumping to his whim just as eagerly as Levin. Even now you're defending his image. What am I to take from that? Can you even conceive of what he did to me? To Levin, Magnus, to all of us?"

The two of them continued to stubbornly bicker, and Argrave's gaze jumped between the two of them. *Orion has mellowed out so much*, he noticed. *Ordinarily, he'd be stomping and getting close to her face and looming and ranting about the gods. I guess he really did have some bad influences.*

His gaze slowly switched to Elenore, who was saying something about how Orion probably enjoyed all of what he'd done in the past. *And Elenore... she's getting a lot more emotional than she normally does. Anneliese told me she's been feeling very guilty lately. That's why she's been working so hard.*

Anneliese placed her hands on her lap and leaned up, looking down at Argrave as he attempted to escape inside the couch. Her amber eyes watched him almost expectantly. On the other side, too, Vasquer stared with what seemed to be hope. Argrave slowly sighed and closed his eyes as he realized what they wanted from him.

Argrave planted his hands on his knees and leaned in, saying loudly, "Alright, alright, *enough!*" He looked between the two of them. Elenore crossed her arms and leaned back onto the couch defensively, and Orion sat there rigidly, surprised.

"You two aren't getting anywhere. Forget Felipe, forget what Orion's done, let's just start with simple, ground-setting crap." Argrave looked between the two of them, then pointed both hands at Orion. "Orion: why do you want to have this meeting, personally?"

Orion looked at Argrave plainly, then took a deep breath. "Galamon told me to invert the problem to find out what I want." The big man closed his eyes. "I cannot keep making... no, I cannot be as I was. And most of all... I don't want to lose more than I already have." A silver tear ran down his cheek.

"I must make right what I made wrong." Orion opened his eyes, gray pupils bright. "I want... a family. A true family. I wish for what was illusion to become reality: love, respect, mutual struggle for prosperity. I thought I had these things, but I wronged Elenore, Levin, Induen, and Magnus in service of parents that did nothing more than weave a tapestry of falsehood. I enjoyed the lie I lived, as much as it disturbs me. But now I want to make that lie a truth." Orion lowered his head. "Please, Elenore."

Elenore stared for a few moments, then looked away, blinking quickly. "Please, what?"

"Please allow me to be a true brother to you, as I never was."

Elenore pursed her lips and said, "I can't exactly stop you."

"Listen," Argrave cut in. "These next few months are going to be *busy*. With Galamon going away, the two of you are going to be my primary people for facilitating things. I need you two to be utterly comfortable with each other. And so..." Argrave tried not to sigh as he finished, "I think we should do this until we've figured it out."

#####

The Tower Master Castro opened the door, stepping in. Argrave and Anneliese, who were eating breakfast, both turned their heads at his arrival.

"Your Majesty," Castro greeted. "You look... tired."

"I feel worse," Argrave returned. "Don't do the majesty stuff. It'll make what I'm going to ask of you awkward."

Castro shot his head back. "What might that be?"

Castro was about to shut the door, but another hand caught it. Rowe the Righteous stepped in, and the two men locked eyes. Rowe was larger than Castro by a far bit, but both held staffs, walked with a slight hunch, and had bald, wrinkly heads.

"You're that Tower Master," Rowe said, his white eyes brightening in curiosity. "Saw you."

"You're Rowe. We've interacted indirectly. I read a spell book you wrote," Castro began evenly.

"Made an impression, I see." Rowe's sagging lips curled in a rare smile.

"Before you two rent a room, hear me out," Argrave interrupted them. "I stayed up all night writing this, but I think I need both of your perspectives."

Argrave stood and retrieved a thin stack of papers, loosely held together by a thin, pliable metal clip. Argrave set it on the table, then ate another bite of food off his plate. Castro eyed the documents curiously, but Rowe picked them up without a care.

"Since we're allies and all... I was hoping you'd help with my A-rank ascension," Argrave said with a fatigued smile once he'd finished chewing.

Rowe read for a small amount of time, then looked up at Argrave. "You're... serious?"

“Who better?” Argrave spread his arms out. “I do wonder who’ll be more helpful. The two of you are at the top of your field, after all... but which of you can do the better job?”

Rowe chuckled dryly. “Does he think we don’t know what he’s doing, manipulating us like that?”

“No, he knows,” Castro took the papers. “He just doesn’t care.”

#####

“Would you look at that,” Melanie said, looking down at a map. She brushed aside her long red hair, then looked up at Durran with a grin. “The last one standing.”

“Really now?” Durran, too, leaned over the map. He surveyed things, then leaned back. “They really folded like a house of cards after what Argrave did.”

“Certain jobs are just peachy when you’ve got the right boss,” Melanie rolled her shoulders, then stretched. “Welcome change after that damned crusade into the taiga, fighting severed heads. We’ll contact this count tomorrow, get his submission one way or the other... and then all of Atrus will be Argrave’s.”

“We still have to finish that crusade,” he reminded her. “I don’t intend on leaving those necromantic abominations in the ground, just waiting to be unleashed on the world. Before we head back, we should kill them all.”

Melanie narrowed her eyes. “I see you’re volunteering.”

“Feeling lazy? Whatever. My bear has to eat somehow,” Durran stepped away from the table.

“I’ll help,” Melanie disagreed. “We’ll bring the whole party, make a festival out of it. Oh, you’re leaving?” she looked back. “Sleep well, I guess.”

Durran left the tent, returning Melanie’s farewell. Once outside, he looked up at the red moon above. He walked through the arrayed tents, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out a small metal object. After a few seconds of prying with his thumb, the top of it came back.

It was a compass. Specifically, it was the mundane compass that Titus had given Argrave all those months ago. It was in Durran’s possession, now. It pointed north faithfully even still, but Durran looked opposite where it was pointing. That was his intended direction.

“Not long now,” Durran muttered, then flipped the lid shut. “How to deliver the news...? Maybe I shouldn’t...”