

## Jackal 351

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 351: First Session

A few dozen people occupied a spacious stone hall. They looked about the place and spoke to each other in hushed tones so as not to send their voices echoing on the unadorned and immaculate walls brightly lit by yellow magic lamps. There were three sections to this room, divided by two separate and gently sloping stairways. These sections had long, thin, continuous tables in rows with chairs just behind them. They all faced a platform that had two chairs beside each other and a podium before them. There was one double door behind the rows of tables and chairs made of simple, heavy black wood. Its surface bore a carving of a sun with its four rays turning into snake heads at the end.

The door opened, splitting the symbol down the middle as it parted for a new arrival. "All take your places for His Majesty Argrave, sovereign of all Vasquer," declared a red-headed woman with a scarred face dressed in flamboyant fashion.

The small crowds dispersed, some of them casting glances at the woman and muttering her name—Melanie. She walked into the leftward section, taking a seat of her own beside some people dressed similarly to her. The place she'd just left was soon filled with new arrivals.

The first to step into the hall was a giant knight wearing golden armor. His long and thick single braid of black hair came out the back of his helmet, swaying in the air as he scanned the room. Soon, other royal knights joined him, taking their place in various strategic positions around the room. Content it was safe, Prince Orion stepped aside for the second arrival.

A pale woman with long, straight black hair in a simple green dress followed, escorted by a few knights of her own. She walked quickly, heading down the right aisle with certain steps. People watched her, but she paid them no mind. Princess Elenore took her place at the podium on the platform, and her knights joined the others.

Lastly, an extremely tall man wearing simple clothes of black and gold entered. He was of average build even despite his height and had medium-length wavy hair colored like obsidian. His skin was somewhat pale, but his sharp jaw and strong gaze gave an impression of vitality. King Argrave took the left aisle flanked by half a dozen knights.

Beside the king was a woman shorter than he was, though still taller than most of the knights escorting them. She had long, straight white hair descending to her waist, some of it brushing past elven ears. She wore a modest white dress with amber decorating it at points, complimenting her eyes of the same color. Queen Anneliese had a dignified calm to her, though when she saw the many people watching took a step closer to Argrave almost by instinct. The Magisters of the Order of the Gray Owl watched her curiously, and the nickname 'Stormdancer' was muttered by a few.

The king and queen made their way to the platform in the back of the room, and then took the two seats set out for them behind the podium. Orion came to stand between the two thrones, diligently watching as he stood prepared to guard the king and queen at any moment. With the royal family so closely gathered, one could tell by their obsidian-like hair and sharp gray eyes that these three were well and truly kin.

“The king is here.” Princess Elenore looked about the room. “Parliament is in session.”

Many adjusted in their spot in nervousness or anticipation. Argrave stared at the back of Elenore’s head while Anneliese’s gaze wandered the room. A golden bird landed on the queen’s shoulder. On the stone arches supporting the ceiling, black foxlike creatures with big ears lounged lazily, golden eyes half-closed.

“There are forty members in attendance on this day.” Elenore finally continued, her eyes wandering until they fell on a tan-skinned man with golden eyes. Durran smiled brightly at her. She continued disaffectedly, saying, “Some are temporary members. Some are standing in for their liege, who may be busy with governance or other duties. Some represent townships and cities. And some represent the interest of magical practitioners. Nevertheless, each and all of you are bound by a duty to represent the interest of all the people of Vasquer and ensure just governance. Do you so swear?”

A vague chorus of, ‘I do,’ echoed throughout the hall. Loudest of all was Magister Artur. He sat in the front row beside his colleagues, unadorned with fine jewelry and hanging mantle as he usually was. He simply sat, eyes dancing with many colors.

“Before we begin, His Majesty would like to say some words.” Elenore stepped away from the podium, placing her hands behind her back.

Argrave rose from his seat and stepped to the throne. He looked throughout the room for a moment. “I will be brief. The purpose of this institution is very simple. It is stability. It is the beating heart of the country. No matter what occurs elsewhere in the body, the heart must keep pumping. It must stand as the representative of the people before the king, letting their voice be heard and their will felt. In the event of dynastic complications or extended misrule, it must keep beating ever onward.

“Here,” Argrave continued, hand held out grandly. “I will make my will known. And in turn, you will make the will of the people known. Like this, the kingdom governs as it vows to: on behalf of the people. Though you are forty now, that number will expand as this instrument of governance spreads its roots throughout the land. You must ensure lifeblood from the heart enriches every inch of this land. Remember this, if nothing else.”

With that, Argrave gave one final look to the parliament, then stepped away back to his seat. Elenore stepped up and resumed her position.

Elenore looked ahead and said loudly, “The first matter for the parliament’s decision is confirmation of His Majesty’s accession to the throne of Vasquer. If any protest, speak now.”

Silence reigned throughout the hall. Elenore waited a few moments.

“Then His Majesty’s accession is undisputed, and King Argrave is confirmed as the sovereign of all Vasquer.” Elenore grabbed the edge of the podium, then continued, “The second matter for parliament’s decision is the unprecedented situation that occurred last week. The first advent of Gerechtigkeits has reared its head in the edge of the Bloodwoods.”

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Argrave and Anneliese were the last to leave the Parliamentary Hall, barring his personal guards. The wide-open vale of what was already coming to be known as Blackgard awaited him, blooming with

wildflowers at the beginning of summer. At the distant edges of the valley, the magic architects of Relize worked to fortify this place in preparation for what was to come. They had made tremendous strides. The mountain was a natural shield, and now the sole path from the south was well-guarded, too.

Argrave's mind whirled as he stared. *As things awaken, spurred and controlled by Gerechtigheit, refugees will come from poorly defended settlements. By land or ocean, we'll take them all. This place will have to scale from empty plains to megalopolis very, very quickly. If we can't... tens of thousands will die. And they might anyway, given the unexpected problem in the Bloodwoods...*

There were very many concerns to address about Blackgard. This soil was conventionally nonarable at present. Even once Argrave solved that problem, the food supply would have to scale to the massive population influx to be sustainable for at least two years, until the crisis was finished. Accepting so many refugees en masse came with its own slew of administrative problems, most of all the prospect of tensions from uneasy people. Furthermore, it promised to be incredibly difficult to establish a new center of administration for a kingdom that'd focused around Dirracha for several centuries. Coastal access would be a boon, but the coastal village already here would have to be expanded to accommodate grander harbors.

"Are you going to keep staring off into space?" Elenore asked him.

Argrave looked down at her. "Maybe I am." He looked back at the wooden double door behind him. "I think that went well. You directed them any which way you pleased."

She crossed her arms. "It wasn't complicated. They're scared. Furthermore, your would-be worshippers of the Relizean army are spreading word of your exploits to anyone who listens—you're well-liked. On top of that, our parliamentary seats don't want to exercise too much authority—they're testing the boundaries of this newfound institution."

Argrave nodded. "I used to be envious of how damned smart you are."

Elenore narrowed her eyes. "What?"

"Now, I'm hoping you're a little smarter than I thought," Argrave finished. "I haven't made things easy for you."

"Could anyone have made it easy?" Anneliese asked.

Elenore shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I can handle it. I can handle them," she turned her head, watching the distant parliamentary seats disperse. She looked back. "You'll be off to your wedding, then."

"Hardly a wedding," Argrave said somewhat bitterly. "More a business trip than a day of festivity. I finalize things with Dras, get Rowe's latest revision of my A-rank ascension theory. After all that, we depart to meet with Nikoletta at the edge of the Bloodwoods the day after. Not exactly a honeymoon."

"You may always renew your vows at a later date, brother," Orion said, bright voice filled with optimism.

"Veidimen tradition does not call for festivity," Anneliese reminded Argrave, grabbing his wrist. "And we are not in a position to want for more. Imagine how it would seem, holding some grandiose ball when you preached about Gerechtigheit's coming."

Argrave took a deep breath and sighed, knowing full well she was right. Still, he couldn't dismiss it from his mind.

"On another note... Durran wishes to speak with you," Elenore said, her voice tight.

"Did he upset you, somehow?" Anneliese asked, in tune with Elenore's emotions.

"He always does," Elenore said with a smile. "I'll be off. I have to get back to the matter of roads."

"Good luck," Argrave left as she walked away.

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"You're leaving?" Argrave asked, somewhat in disbelief.

They were in a small party consisting of Argrave, Anneliese, Orion, the royal knights, Durran, and Melanie. Their group travelled across the grass of the vale, heading for the bridge that led back north so that they could head off to the edge of the Bloodwoods.

"No, I'm asking permission to leave," Durran rephrased it, pointing both of his hands gauntleted in wyvern scale at Argrave's chest. "If you can think of a better use for me, I'll stay. That said, I think my best use would be gathering together some allies and treasures in the Burnt Desert to provide aid."

"I don't get it," Melanie shook her head. "You do all that work getting Elenore's trust, now you want to head off?"

"She's got minions of higher pedigree, now," Durran shook his head, disagreeing. "What do you say, old pals king and queen? Am I permitted to leave?"

Argrave looked to the distant bridge, then sighed. "At least Galamon had a wife to come back to. But you? Looks like everyone's going home. Did I miss the trend?"

"The trend is that the demons have landed, and everyone is trying their best to pitch in," Durran walked ahead and spread his arms out. "After that stuff from the Bloodwoods spread around, everyone knows that something is very, very off. From what I hear, your cousin is lucky to be alive. I think I'd do better as a liaison with the Burnt Desert than a glorified assistant to your sister."

Anneliese looked at him. "Is that all?"

Durran clicked his tongue. "No, it's not. I was hoping you could brief me about the ins and outs of the Burnt Desert, so that my time there can be... especially fruitful," he alluded vaguely.

"It's your homeland," Melanie pointed out, still ignorant of Argrave's depth of knowledge. "Why are you asking him?"

"She keeps questioning me," Durran pointed his thumb at her. "Could you give a royal prerogative to muzzle?"

"I guess I can tell you what I know," Argrave sighed, ignoring Durran's joke. "Supposed to be my wedding, but I have to talk about that sandy place. You're asking a lot."

Durran frowned. "What's the big deal? It's just a marriage."

"Is nothing sacred here?" Argrave caressed his forehead. "Nobody's ever heard of grand marital ceremonies?"

Durran responded back with banter of his own, but Argrave barely heard him. Occupying his mind was the coming meeting with Nikoletta—the first in many months, and with her father's whereabouts still unknown. And even more than that... what happened in the Bloodwoods loomed above, like Gerechtigkeits's personal response to all Argrave's efforts.

And the worst part... is that it might be just that.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 352: Familial Mending**

Argrave stepped into the courtyard of the grand fortress that had been constructed at his behest some months ago. It marked the northern entrance to Blackgard where they'd tunneled through the mountain to bridge the Indanus Divide. The garrison had made the place much more habitable since he last visited, building ramshackle if effective homes like some sort of castle town. He didn't intend to stay long. Still, someone waited for him: the two-eyed, red-haired Elias of Parbon.

"Your Majesty," Elias greeted, lowering his head.

"Don't do that. You get a pass," Argrave waved his hand. "You and your father can call me whatever you want in private, as far as I'm concerned."

Elias raised his brow, and Argrave couldn't help but stare at his two ruby-like eyes. A month ago one of them had been rotted away by a disease commonly known as the waxpox, but now they were whole and healthy again.

"Why'd you ask me to meet at the north side? I have to travel south to return home," the man reflected.

"You're right," Argrave shook his head. "Slipped my mind. But Durran and his fingers are back, and your eye looks whole... so I have to ask, how's your sister?"

"She's singing a lot," Elias said brightly. "And she says she's happy. I'm not inclined to doubt her." He scratched just above his forehead, then began, "Argrave... I can't thank you enough. Me, my sister, both of us..."

Argrave held his hand out. "So don't thank me at all. I don't want to hear it. I'm more interested in that other thing I asked you and your father to deal with."

Elias shook his head lightly. "You've... never mind. Alright, well..." Elias looked off to the gate. "Things are just like you said: the people that had the plague have a lot of trouble returning to their lives. People won't employ them, and sometimes their old homes reject them. A lot of fear in the air. Most of the nobles were glad to have us expel the plague-ridden from their land. They viewed it as a personal favor from His Majesty," the man finished bitterly.

"Then you've been rounding them up, sending them to Dirracha?" Argrave pressed.

"Yeah. Most of them got into the temporary housing." Elias nodded. "I never thought you the charitable sort. Why are you doing this?"

Argrave frowned. "Am I so horrible?"

Elias stared.

"I'm making some changes to the military," Argrave sighed in defeat. "Whenever the kings of the past needed an army, their options were three—their personal forces, their vassal's forces, and a widespread levy. Separate, they're insufficient. Together, they're rather grand." Argrave waved his finger and shook his head. "That structure is a mistake, long term. I'm tossing it aside, making something wholly new."

"You'll make them soldiers?" Elias looked taken aback. "Argrave, these people—"

"They won't be treated like levies, don't worry." Argrave interrupted Elias once again. "You might not know this, but the waxpox fed on magic to sustain and grow itself. Because of the disease's attraction to magic, I can imagine there's going to be a great many diamonds in the rough, so to speak. Beyond that, those young and malleable enough will form the core of my new personal force—not royal guards, but professional soldiers. They'll be paid. Then, they can take care of their families. And when it's feasible... House Quadreign will treat those it can with its flame."

Elias scratched at his cheek. "That's... rather noble."

Argrave said nothing. He wasn't doing this to be noble—he was doing it because everyone available needed to be used in the fight ahead. And he'd stolen the idea from Orion and his Waxknights, regardless.

"I'll keep sending them to Dirracha, then." Elias' voice was a little more optimistic than before.

"Elenore can handle the next part. Don't worry—she's been briefed," Argrave shook his head.

Elias nodded. "So... you're getting married?" he looked at Anneliese, who had been quiet during this exchange. "Me too. That's what I'm coming home to."

"You're having a wedding?" Argrave pointed.

"Sure, I think," Elias shrugged.

Argrave looked at Anneliese pointedly.

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They departed from the fortress at a little past midday. They travelled small, their group consisting only of Argrave, Anneliese, Orion, and some of his Waxknights. The journey from the fortress to Relize had taken four days in the past, but that had been with a sizable force of somewhat uncoordinated infantrymen on a steady pace. With fast-moving horses, the marble city of Relize came into sight by dusk. But Dras' encampment, their true destination, was long before that. That place was more visible in many ways considering Rowe's dragon, Crystal Wind, rested on the ground with its pearl-like body.

When they neared, Argrave recognized Patriarch Dras from a distance. He spotted another person at his side, and hastened the horse even more before Orion chided him to be more cautious. Once the two met, Argrave dismounted, walking forth with a smile.

"Galamon!" Argrave called out, walking to the man quickly.

Galamon stepped ahead of Dras, taking off his helmet. His white hair was usually long, but he'd trimmed it. He stood there, stoic as ever. Argrave gave him a hearty hug.

"It's damn good to see you." Argrave pulled his head away.

"I thought it best to come." Galamon looked to the side. "Anneliese."

"Hello again, Galamon," she waved, smiling too.

"This guy treating you alright?" Argrave pressed, pointing his thumb at Dras as he stepped away. "Things going well in Veiden?"

"...I'm glad I asked for him," Dras said seriously. "And I'm sorry to see these men go," the patriarch looked back.

Argrave frowned, then looked to Galamon to seek confirmation. The snow elf gave a somber nod, agreeing that things were indeed as dire as the patriarch claimed.

"There are mountains and glaciers in Veiden that are uninhabitable. Most people thought there was nothing beyond them, but... a Twisted Twin of the Winter descended, driven mad by... well, you can imagine what. The beast killed half a hundred before he was slain."

"A..." Argrave struggled to remember Veidimen lore from Heroes of Berendar. "A frost ettin?"

"I don't know what an ettin is, but you're probably right," Dras let out a long sigh. "It's not just that. Things thought long dead are reappearing. On top of that, Galamon is still investigating the supposed reemergence of the Ebon Cult." The patriarch closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again and fixed his gaze on Argrave. "Hah. It must sound like I'm guilting you into letting me keep my men."

"I am incapable of feeling shame," Argrave shook his head.

Dras laughed loudly. "Well, that's good. I've found that to be a very valuable trait as a leader."

"Galamon," Orion said, stepping ahead of Argrave. "The royal knights you drilled..."

"Yes?" the snow elf said evenly, staring Orion eye-to-eye.

"They're very skilled," Orion said earnestly. "You have the soul of a commander, and that shines through in their eyes. I'm looking forward to seeing how these men of yours will transform Vasquer."

Galamon furrowed his brows, confused, then dismissed that and said simply, "Thanks."

The sound of a heavy piece of wood meeting the grass attracted Argrave's attention, and he turned his head to watch Rowe walking over.

"Galamon—get everyone together, bring them here," Dras directed him. Galamon nodded and walked off as Rowe took his place in front of their group.

"Look at you," Rowe said, sizing him up. "You're getting fat."

Argrave was taken aback and looked down at his stomach. "No, I think I was just quite skinny before."

“Not your body. Your head. That has to be what’s inside there, considering how utterly shoddy this thesis of yours remains,” Rowe retrieved a stack of papers, waving them about in the air. “You’ve been eating the low-hanging fruits, and now you’ve found yourself too fat to jump to get the harder ones.”

Argrave laughed, Rowe’s brutal criticism welcome reprieve from being called ‘Your Majesty’ by each and all. “I think I’m almost ready to put that shoddy thesis into action, ascend to A-rank. Just have to get everything in place.”

“You’ve been ready to do so for weeks, now. You’re just a coward. Everything has to be perfect for you to take the slightest step forward. Rather unlike your woman, here.” Rowe looked to Anneliese.

“He is younger than I am,” Anneliese defended. “And he bled for me, otherwise I would have failed utterly.”

Rowe snickered, but as he did, a great rumbling shook the earth. Argrave craned his neck, looking beyond cautiously. Orion’s royal knights came to attention, too, placing their hands on their swords. Then, Argrave realized what it was.

Three hundred Veidimen warriors stepped out of their tents in a refined and practiced order, marching almost in lockstep before they took a formation behind Patriarch Dras. They had Ebonice axes on their waists, swords as tall as grown men in their hands, and shields big enough to cover their whole torso strapped to their arms. Many were larger than Galamon... and each had an icy discipline in their eyes.

“These are your men,” Galamon declared, stepping out of the crowd until he came to Argrave. “I chose them, personally. Each and all signed contracts in blood to serve you, and only you, until their deaths. They will do whatever you ask of them. I will introduce you to the three officers of their number later.”

Argrave looked at them just as they looked at him. They seemed like proud lions, each and all. Just as they would be devastating on the battlefield, so too would they be hard to tame. Their loyalty was assured by contract, but Argrave wanted their respect. He’d have to think of how to earn it.

Dras put his hand on his waist, looking them down. “Three hundred and three—more than was asked for. My three best officers are here, and I hate to lose them. But I made a promise, and it will be kept.” He looked at Anneliese. “They’re a fitting honor guard to be gifted for my daughter’s wedding, I should think.”

“How is the adoption playing in Veiden?” Argrave asked curiously.

“People understand,” Dras shook his head. “And Rowe... spoke on her behalf,” the patriarch alluded vaguely. “Regarding her... before we begin the ceremony, there’s something Anneliese should hear.”

Anneliese’s face grew accommodating as she asked, “Yes? What is it?”

“Your mother and younger sister are here,” Dras said evenly.

Anneliese’s composure faded for a moment as her features twisted in surprise. “What? You cannot be serious,” she said, blinking quickly as her hands moved anxiously. “Why?”

“Is it so strange?” Dras tilted his head. “They... well, your mother wanted to speak to you before the wedding,” he corrected. “Alone, preferably.”

Anneliese stood there agape.

"I see this might not be as innocent a request as I thought it was. I took you as my daughter," Dras continued. "If you say no, they will not speak to you. Still, I've delivered the message."

Anneliese looked at Argrave. He offered her his hand, and she took it. For a few seconds, she said nothing. Then, after swallowing, she said, "I will meet them."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 353: The Reunion Union**

Anneliese pushed open the fur flap of a traditional Veidimen tent, walking within. The first thing she saw was a wood-burning iron stove, its makeshift chimney piping smoke through a hole in the top of the circular tent. These dwellings could be constructed in thirty minutes by veteran Veidimen, and the fur padding outside and wood stove could stave off the coldest conditions. It brought back memories, and seemed far out of place in the warmth of the summer they found themselves in.

Next, her mother fell into sight: Kressa. She was short for a Veidimen, not at all like long-legged Anneliese. Even still, that placed her a little above six feet. She had bright white eyes and golden blonde hair kept at shoulder-length. She looked a little heavier than Anneliese remembered. The probable explanation for that sat in her hands—a newborn child.

"Anneliese," Kressa said, her voice bright with genuine surprise. "I didn't think you'd come. Much less alone."

Anneliese kept her feet firmly rooted to the ground as she replied, "Dras said you asked me to come alone."

"Well... yes, I did. But you never listened to me in the past," Kressa shook her head, then when the baby in her hands made a noise, soothed it quietly. "Look. Your baby sister, Rache," she said, holding the child out slightly.

Anneliese looked at the little girl wrapped in furs. Though she had Kressa's eye and hair color, she recognized bits and pieces of her mother's husband in the facial features. She refocused on her mother and said, "I thought that Dras was talking about Jirella."

*Perhaps I set myself up for disappointment thinking that she would come,* Anneliese reflected, but left those words unspoken.

"The day you left without a word was the day we found out I was pregnant with Rache," Kressa continued. "You can't blame Jirella for being upset."

Anneliese sighed and turned on her heel towards the entrance.

"Don't go," her mother called out with some urgency, stepping forward. "Don't go, please. I didn't come here to fight."

Anneliese paused and looked back. Her mother's genuine plea brought her pause, and she hesitantly stepped away from the entrance.

"It was very difficult for me to muster the courage to come here again," Kressa said with a tremoring voice. "This place brings back only bad memories. The unending green, the people... we barely survived."

Annelise swallowed, looking down at her mother. "Then why did you, exactly? I have some trouble understanding it."

"Because I don't want to part," Kressa said simply. "You're my daughter. You're my family. We can't just never speak again—that's not right."

Anneliese stood silently, blinking as she waited for her mother to continue.

"Word of you reaches home very often," Kressa continued, looking to her child and lightly swaying. "And look at you. You look wonderful. Apparently, Rowe the Righteous tells all those he teaches that they're drooling imbeciles compared to you. He gave my mother a real dressing down when she fought back," she laughed.

Anneliese chuckled quietly.

"I was really glad that she got taken down a peg. I can't remember how many times she did the same to me. Ah, but... don't mistake me," Kressa said. "I'm not here to ask you for anything, or... or take advantage of you, or anything like that. I just... I was very sad when you left. I cried enough your father thought I would miscarry."

"My father's dead," Anneliese shook her head.

Kressa's face tightened. "You know what I meant. My husband."

Anneliese nodded calmly.

Kressa stared for a few moments, then said, "Dras claims you're getting married."

"In the Veidimen way," Anneliese nodded.

"To the king, no less," Kressa smiled. "I remember in my time here... anyone that spoke ill of the king was hated. Everyone answers to him. But you... you're so talented, smart, beautiful... I think you're the reason he is where he is, hmm?" She smiled up at Anneliese sincerely, the spitting image of a proud mother. "Your father... your real father, he was that way, too. Even if he was living scum, he was talented."

Anneliese crossed her arms and shifted away on her feet.

"So, do you think I can meet your husband-to-be?" Kressa pressed. "If not, perhaps you could tell me about him? We can spend the day, maybe."

Anneliese raised a brow, minutely surprised. She slowly lowered her arms and said, "He's... his name is Argrave."

"Argrave... definitely a name from this land," Kressa nodded, stepping back towards the stove. "Shall we meet him? Or maybe we can sit down, talk? I'd love to hear an update from you. We can take the day to catch up!"

"I, uh..." Anneliese stepped a little more inside the tent. "I fear I cannot, today."

"Oh, how forgetful of me," Kressa shook her head. "Your wedding. Then, tomorrow, certainly?"

"No," Anneliese shook her head. "Not just that. I have other things I must attend to with Argrave. I'm afraid that it's just not feasible to linger for too long."

"When, then?" Kressa tilted her head.

"Things are very busy," Anneliese shook her head. "Perhaps I can write, but we head off to the Bloo—"

"You can't bear to see my face, is that it?" Kressa said with a tight voice. Anneliese eyed her cautiously as her mother continued, "I fed you, clothed you, kept you safe, and you don't want to even look at me, talk to me more than a few minutes?"

Anneliese suddenly felt very exhausted, and she rubbed between her eyes to ward that away. Old patterns realigned in her head, and as they did, she remembered the best solution. "Goodbye, Kressa," she said decisively, stepping towards the door.

"Where are you going? Don't go, Anneliese!" Kressa called out. This time Anneliese did not change course, and so she spat, "All I did for you, and you'll never show me one ounce of affection? That man, he's not your blood!"

The baby, Rache, started crying as Anneliese's steps quickened. She pushed past the tent flaps, then walked through the camp with quick steps.

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"It was... strange, coming home," Galamon said. "So much has changed. So much stayed the same." The elf took a deep breath and sighed. "Rhomaden was a tiny little bundle when I left. Could fit him in my hand. Now..." Galamon looked off to the side. "I think I'm just a big man called 'father' to him. Missed so much. So much I can never do with him."

Argrave listened patiently but didn't know how to respond. Instead, he asked, "But Muriem... she was happy to see you, right?"

Galamon lowered his head and grinned. "...yes."

Argrave raised his brows. "See? I told you it'd all work out."

Galamon fixed his cold white eyes upon Argrave. "But it hasn't. It's only begun."

"It's true," Argrave admitted. "That's why I was hoping to get some details about what—" he trailed off as Galamon's head whipped to the side.

Anneliese pushed open the flaps to the tent and stepped in quickly. She paused when she saw Galamon and Argrave sitting together.

"We can finish another time," Galamon said, rising from his chair. He left quickly.

Anneliese slowly walked to Argrave as he rose to his feet. She rubbed her eyes hard, looking as though she was utterly exhausted. She planted her head against his shoulder, sighing deeply.

"That bad, huh?" he said, wrapping his arms around her.

"You noticed? How empathic," she replied drolly. "My head feels full of rocks. I struggle to keep it above my shoulders."

Argrave put his hand on the back of her head and jostled it lightly. "Seems normal to me. Might be cement brain, though. Harder to detect."

Anneliese laughed once, staying still. "I cannot make sense of it," she said quietly, voice muffled. "In one moment, she acts so kind, so loving... and it is genuine, I know it. She feels these things as surely as she expresses them. The next... her tongue turns to acid. Such a hatred, just as pure as the love had been. I got out before it got as bad as it usually does, but... hah. Historically, I know it is best to avoid her. Still, afterwards... I always wonder if this time, things would have been different."

Argrave kissed the top of her head, holding her quietly.

"It was like that when I was younger, too," Anneliese recounted distantly. "She would cry, call me precious, hold me tight... but the inverse came just as quickly. And if I avoided her, she would say she was going to hurt herself, jump into the ocean..."

Argrave basked in the silence, then thought of something. "Is that why you hated those jokes about suicide...?"

"Yeah," Anneliese finished.

He took a deep breath. "Damn, I'm... I'm sorry, Anne."

"Hmm," she grunted into his shoulder. "Maybe I was just being sensitive."

Argrave shook his head. "Don't think that way."

Anneliese lifted her head up and looked at him, amber eyes shining against the last light of dusk. "I like thinking that way. I saw countless people that, when faced with one tragedy, turned it into five or six by weakness of will." She shook her head. "Self-pity does nothing for no one. No matter what comes, you cannot pity yourself."

"Is that a lesson for me?" Argrave tilted his head.

"If you had ever truly pitied yourself, you would not have come this far," Anneliese told him, then closed her eyes. "I think I am preaching. I apologize."

"I like hearing the way you think," Argrave disagreed. "But put all that nonsense with your mother behind you, Anneliese."

"And my sister," Anneliese pointed out. "My *baby* sister."

"Your mother had another kid?" Argrave furrowed his brows, and then when Anneliese nodded he looked to the side and said, "Wow."

"We should get ready," Anneliese reminded him.

#####

The red moon was directly overhead, full and bright. Anneliese and Argrave sat atop a hill, peering up at the moon.

"So... we just stay out under the moonlight, and come morning, we're married? This would be kind of dangerous in Veiden, no?" Argrave asked Anneliese.

"Barring the vows, you're correct. You would think it is dangerous," Anneliese agreed. "These joining ceremonies seldom end in harm, though, and then it's supposedly a sign of a poor match." She looked at him. "It's quite rare for people to actually do this. Typically, the couple simply tells the chieftain or makes a public announcement. Like I said—Veidimen culture is not especially grand."

"Vows, huh?" Argrave lied down against the grass. "I've got a lot in mind. I could make the vow to never love another woman..."

"That might make having daughters troublesome," Anneliese reflected.

Argrave laughed. "Fair point."

"You don't need to vow anything," Anneliese said, and he looked at her in confusion. "I know how you feel."

"What if I want to?" Argrave looked at her.

Anneliese stared back for a few moments. "Well, I suppose Veid would hear these vows. Then, you'd be punished if you broke them." She looked back at the moon. "Given that Veid might be coming to this realm soon enough... perhaps it's best to keep that tongue sealed."

"Erlebnis told us that a lot of gods are keeping their eye on us, not just Veid," Argrave reminded her. "Hmm... if that's the case..." he laughed.

"What?" she looked at him funny.

"I vow... that if any of you godly pieces of shit hurt Anneliese, I'll personally see to your death," Argrave declared, pointing to the sky and shooting finger-guns.

Anneliese looked extremely embarrassed and hid her face. "You are practically *inviting* disaster, you realize."

Argrave laughed, then wrapped his arm around her waist. "Well, you pointed it out. That neutralizes it."

She resisted briefly as he tried to pull her towards him, but in a moment fell atop Argrave and rested against his chest. After a moment of laughter, the two of them settled down in peace.

"Since you made a vow..." she said quietly. "I vow... that I'll make sure you and I live long and happy lives."

Argrave smiled broadly. "You've outclassed me yet again. I think I'm gonna steal your vow, make it my own. And since we're both saying it, it's definitely going to happen."

"You pointed it out," Anneliese said. "That neutralizes it."

"Ah, damn," Argrave played along. "Quick, think of another one."

## Jackal Among Snakes

### **Chapter 354: New and Old**

The night came and went very quickly. Argrave and Anneliese spent a lot of time together, but they seldom did so while doing nothing more than enjoying each other's company. In this manner, the joining ceremony was a precious opportunity that reminded him of the good fortune he'd had in meeting her. Argrave had been complaining about not having a proper wedding, but by the morning he came to realize that this was a far nicer way to celebrate than with expensive pageantry and large groups of people obsessing over the two of them.

They returned in the morning. The Veidimen warriors were eating their rations—salted meat constituted the bulk of that. They were big and fierce, but that meant they ate nearly twice as much as a normal person to maintain that strength. Galamon had assured Argrave that these men were used to dealing with food shortages and foraging, but it still elicited some concern.

After some time to eat of their own, Argrave and Anneliese rejoined with Orion and then met with the patriarch once again. He was with Rowe and Galamon in his tent, dismantling some equipment to pack for their journey back.

"Congratulations," were Dras' first words to them as he deconstructed a chair. "The two of you are now husband and wife. Dare I ask what vows you made?"

"Well..." Argrave scratched his ear. "We made a lot of them. Couple hundred, maybe."

Anneliese laughed quietly in remembrance of last night.

Dras gave confused glances between the two of them, but he prudently shook his head and dismissed it. "Then we'll be going. The men I promised are yours—the rest will be sailing back to Veiden today."

"I'm thankful for your support. These men will be well-utilized." Argrave nodded, then turned his head to Rowe. "And I appreciate your refinement of my A-rank ascension. I think the next time we meet, you'll be very surprised."

"Hmm, sure." Rowe nodded. "I think you'll still be dragging your feet when next we meet. Or maybe I'll be looking down at a corpse in a coffin. That would be a little less surprising than your success. Your ascension is an active body reformation—those are the most dangerous kind, you realize. Not many of those are discovered... without incident."

"I've gotten advice from so many people, it'd be embarrassing if I failed," Argrave shook his head. "And besides, I'll be doing it in a place that minimizes my risk."

"Ah, yes. The classic coward's tactic: take risks only when it's not risky." Rowe nodded knowingly. "If you succeed, though..." the old S-rank wizard shook his head, eyes a little wide. "I'll have to make far fewer jokes at your expense."

"I question if that day will ever truly come." Argrave shook his head, and then stepped up to Galamon. "I think it's time you introduce me to those officers so we can get on the road."

"Come," Galamon said, stepping past Argrave.

Along the way, Galamon explained what he'd promised to the day before: namely, the situation in Veiden. It was more or less as Argrave expected it to be. Fear and panic were high, and the problem was exacerbated by occasional assaults of things that fell under the waxing influence of Gerechtigkeits. The same thing prevailed here in Berendar, too, though Veiden was being hit harder—perhaps it was because of their unity, or perhaps there were simply more things for Gerechtigkeits to throw at the Veidimen.

Eventually, they entered into the officer's tents. The three of them in question knelt on the ground, cleaning up the last of the interior of their tent. When Galamon and Argrave entered, they rose and came to attention. Though uniform in equipment, they all looked a little different.

"This is Bastal." Galamon gestured towards a white-haired, white-eyed man. He was the smallest of the three and kept his hair long yet bound into a ponytail. "That's Grimalt." The next was a shaven man with amber eyes—the largest of the three, standing taller and wider than even Orion. "And then Rasten." The last was a lithe man with golden eyes and hair. He reminded Argrave of Durran, and not from eye color alone. "Each of these three command a unit of one hundred."

Galamon looked at the men. "You will call him Your Majesty," he informed them, then pointed at Anneliese. "And her, Your Highness."

"Yes, sir," the men confirmed in bold unison.

Galamon nodded. "In time, I'll return as knight-commander. For now, you answer to the king and queen first, and this man second." He looked at Orion.

"They seem like good fighters," Orion said, voice echoey from behind his golden helmet.

"And spellcasters," Argrave noted. "Dras went far beyond what I asked."

"They're B-rank, all three. They stagnated there," Galamon nodded. "I may have insisted Dras allow me to choose them in particular."

Argrave smiled and stepped closer. "I'm going to ask a lot of you. Not just you three, but each and every man beneath you. If you know the prophecy, then you know what comes. And if you know what comes, then you'll know that what we have is insufficient to fully contest who you know as He Who Would Judge the Gods. You're going to have a large number of men beneath your command, in time. Not only that, but they'll all be fresh—you'll have to bring them from the ground to the skies."

"We're prepared, Your Majesty," answered Bastal, quickest to adapt.

"I hope so," Argrave nodded. "Tell me—what do you think about fighting Galamon?"

The three of them hesitated, saying nothing. Gradually, Grimalt managed to say, "He's unbeatable."

"Even with magic?" Argrave pressed.

"If he has Ebonice, almost definitely unbeatable, Your Majesty," Rasten confirmed. "The man's a fish in water compared to a baby in the sea. As a matter of fact, I'd prefer to be a baby against a fish than fight against Galamon."

Argrave spread his arms out. “Some of that is him. But some of that is this, also.” Argrave tapped Galamon’s armor.

Galamon crossed his arms, nodding.

“We’re going to be heading to a place called the Bloodwoods. But first, we need to make a stop at a city called Relize. Each and every one of you are going to be sized for new armor. It enhances your physical prowess, wards you from lesser attacks. And then... I think you’ll find Galamon a little less unbeatable.”

The three looked at him stoically even despite his uplifting words. Disciplined, professional, stoic—these men exuded the same qualities that Galamon did. It was precisely what he needed to make the sort of force that he wanted.

“Tell the men to gather their things and prepare to march,” Argrave directed them.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” they replied asynchronously, then gathered some things efficiently and stepped outside.

Once they were gone, Orion said cautiously, “I think it will be impossible to find enough large horses to carry these men. Preparing one for you and I and a few others—certainly, it’s manageable, but... three hundred? Few horses are bred stalwartly enough.”

Argrave stepped towards the tent’s flap, parting it. Once outside, his eyes wandered the camp. Grimalt barked out an order. And then... it was like a beehive come alive. Their tents could house five, and each group of five worked with startling efficiency to prepare for travel. In one minute, all the fur lining was gone. In the second, everything within was stowed away. In the next, the wooden constructions were dismantled. By the fourth, they were packing these materials away into backpacks. And before the fifth minute passed, all three hundred stood arrayed. A vast plain lay empty where the camp had been.

Galamon and Anneliese watched with pride, and Argrave looked at Orion. “Something tells me that won’t matter much.”

Orion looked back. Even the tent they’d just been in moments ago was gone, stripped and packed away. Argrave was very much looking forward to seeing them pitch these tents.

#####

They parted for Relize not too long after the men had finished preparing—funnily enough, it took longer for Argrave’s party to prepare than it did the troops. After saying a final farewell to Galamon, they left at midmorning. Along the way, Anneliese and Argrave discussed how best to utilize these new elven forces to build up the army he envisioned. Having the snow elves’ disciplined coordination permeate his army would be a greater boon than one hundred thousand men.

Their troop was received by Ansgar Dandalan on behalf of his father, Leopold. Once there, a great many of Elenore’s men were ready and waiting to receive the Veidimen. They took their measurements, wrote down names, and then prepared to send those into Dirracha. There, the royal smiths would reforge royal knights’ gear into armor that fit them. For practicality, Argrave requested that the armor *not* be ridiculous and shiny gold. Orion didn’t like this, but unfortunately for him he’d abdicated to Argrave and so was not king.

Argrave oversaw things for a little while, ensuring that the Veidimen would be taken care of here in Relize in way of food and such. Rather than disturb the citizenry, he commanded that they pitch their tents outside the city. He intended to join them to build the beginnings of camaraderie. But first...

"Elenore sent something for you both, Your Majesty, Your Highness, alongside a report," Ansgar informed Argrave and Anneliese after a while. "It wasn't urgent, so I refrained from immediately telling you. Still, I think you should see it."

After blanking for a few moments, Argrave placed what she might've sent and smiled. "Right, right. Let's see it, then."

Argrave followed Ansgar into the city with Orion as his escort, heading towards Leopold's estate by the river. Once there, they were led into a side room.

"Leopold around?" Argrave questioned.

"I believe so, Your Majesty. Shall I get him for you?" Ansgar gestured towards the door.

"No, no," Argrave waved his hand, looking towards the table as Anneliese walked towards it. She picked up a breastplate and held it up in the air. As she examined it, he pressed, "These are the items?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ansgar confirmed. "Shall I send for someone to help you wear these?"

"I think that Anneliese and I can take care of it," Argrave said, waving Ansgar away. "Thank you. You can go now. Orion, please wait outside the door."

The prince nodded, stepping out alongside Ansgar. Once the door was shut, Argrave walked up to stand beside Anneliese.

"They are rather pretty," she said, looking at them.

"Pretty?" Argrave watched her, then looked to the armor on the table.

Argrave's leather armor made in Jast had served him very well throughout his journey—served Anneliese, too. Both of them might be dead without it. Even still, it was only made to modern enchanting standards, and thus far inferior to salvaged elven gear that the royals worked with. Elenore was going to remedy this rather simply, but in an unexpected turn of events, Artur, a Magister of the Order, had offered to add his own personal enchantments to the gear atop the elven enchantments of old.

Needless to say, this made Argrave paranoid at first. From what he recalled, Artur had argued vehemently against Vasquer's equal cooperation with the Order. Measures were taken, however—Castro personally monitored the process of making the gear. Anneliese even verified Artur's sincerity. With those two assurances, Argrave let it happen.

Artur was the best enchanter in all of Heroes of Berendar, barring an enchantment-focused player. He knew a few old elven methods, even—lore dictated he'd discovered them on his own, entirely independent of their civilization. The man had promised a very appealing piece of armor, and Argrave couldn't deny him.

This new armor was not too far removed from what Argrave worked with last time. It was two sets of leather—one black, one gray. The gray one was heavier, the black lighter. They both had heavy, fur-lined dusters. Beyond the fact they were fully repaired, Argrave saw much more metal at points—this was to accommodate the new enchantments, no doubt, as leather couldn't carry magic as well as metal. The most significant addition was a large metal breast plate.

Argrave could see the magic pulsing along the metallic armor's surface. The front of the plate was indented intricately with his personal heraldry—a sun with eight rays, the four on the cardinal directions ending in snake heads. It was a dark, brassy color. As Anneliese said, the magic made the breast plate look rather beautiful.

"Hmm..." Argrave picked it up.

"Would you help me put it on?" Anneliese looked at him.

Argrave looked at the armor, then at her. "No. I'll wear it first, test dummy it."

Anneliese scoffed but listened. He removed his clothes, putting on the new black leathers first and then the breastplate over it. Anneliese had to help him with that part, naturally. Last was the duster. Argrave rolled his arms about once it was all in place—at once, he felt some difference. When he jumped, it was much higher than he remembered.

"Damn. Watch me on the b-ball court," Argrave noted, kicking his legs outward and inward. "I feel pretty powerful."

Anneliese threw something at his face. Argrave flinched involuntarily, yet nothing struck him. He saw what she'd thrown rebounded, cast to the ground harmlessly.

"What was that for?" he demanded.

"It seems Artur's enchantments are in place." Anneliese picked up what she'd thrown—an acorn of some kind. She threw it again. Argrave didn't flinch this time—wind manifested, batting the projectile aside. "Amazing. I wonder how it works..." she mused, stepping up and examining her own piece. She looked back at Argrave after a moment. "It seems we are a little better equipped than we were. And Artur's to thank."

Argrave looked down at his armor in wonder. "Looks that way," he agreed. "I wonder what else is on this thing...?"

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 355: Sea of Land**

It was the morning of the next day. They had slept in a separate tent with the Veidimen. Argrave stared at a piece of soft bread with distinct finger marks. That had been his doing—in grabbing the bread, he underestimated his strength and crushed it. There had been several other similar incidents this morning alone to the point where Orion had even given him advice. That wasn't something he thought he'd ever be dealing with.

Fortunately, he wasn't alone in this. Anneliese, too, wore her reforged armor. She adapted quicker, but she also broke a doorknob in Leopold's home. The power that these enchantments granted was

overwhelming. As Argrave got the ball rolling, he intended to specialize his enchantments to those relating to magic. For now, this was a welcome boon.

On top of all of that, there was what Artur had added to the armor—protection from mundane weapons and projectiles on the whole body, temperature moderation, and slow fall. Each and all would be immeasurably useful, though frankly, Argrave did debate leaving it off despite the total confidence from Anneliese and Castro both. The incident with Traugott still rung in his mind, and even today the man's whereabouts were unknown.

In the end, Argrave's reason won out. Artur was a very prideful person and hated being looked down upon. He was completely obsessed with personal standing. Unlike Traugott, who found no worth in what people thought of him, Artur *only* cared what other people thought of him. He wore flashy jewelry, showed off his enchanting prowess by hovering in the air with his mantle, and made sure that his products were far superior to anyone else's. All that Argrave knew of him suggested that he would never deliberately sabotage some of his work.

Still, the decision was close enough Argrave brought out an old doubt-assuager, perhaps hoping it might magically have new entries.

Traits: [Black Blooded], [Intelligent], [Magic Affinity (High)], [Blessing of Supersession (MAX)]

Skills: [Elemental Magic (B)], [Blood Magic (B)], [Healing Magic (B)], [Illusion Magic (B)], [Warding Magic (B)], [Druidic Magic (B)], [Inscription (B)], [Imbuing (B)]

Argrave had the bread in his right hand, a piece of paper to his right side, and the bronze hand mirror to his left hand. It had been a long time since he looked at the mirror. It now had B's all across the board. It reminded him of high school—all B's, consistently below great grades.

Whatever the mirror said, he hadn't needed it to bolster his courage in a long time. His brain adapted to this world fully... hell, he was married, even. If that wasn't adaptation, what was? And frankly, his nightmares had all but vanished. He did wonder if that might change in short order as Gerechtigkeits started making himself known. Nightmares from beyond the void were rather adept at creating nightmares in the head.

"Hmm. It looks like Vasquer is going to be ready to move, soon," Anneliese said, hunched over the paper to his right as she read.

Argrave chewed and swallowed, then said, "Really? That's good news. She'll be a lot safer in Blackgard, I think. Fewer people around. Big mountain range to hide in. Nothing really dangerous to bother her, barring the stuff that's deeper under the mountain."

He took another bite, and Anneliese turned her eyes away from the paper. "Would you like me to dictate Elenore's report for you, considering you're busy stuffing your face?"

Argrave smiled as he chewed, then swallowed. "Just give me the summary."

Anneliese laughed and seized the paper. "Well... okay. Elenore is enlarging the parliament, giving them more official and active roles in overseeing governance. With the money from taxes and the trade from the Archduchy, she's looking into expanding her information network a bit more, and also branching out into businesses that she was unable to as the Bat."

He nodded as he ate.

“Vasquer will be—oh, already read that...” Anneliese listed. “The foundation for the army is being set. She hopes to have a large body of fresh troops prepared by the time we return, with basic fitness seen to. She’s establishing provision agents for purchasing supplies more efficiently—that is rather smart,” she remarked. “Repairing and building roads for faster transportation... and the first extermination and retrieval team has been sent out, with Melanie heading it.”

“Which ruin will they be exploring?” Argrave focused.

“Hmm... off the coast, near the mountains of House Parbon...”

“Leviathan Ruins, probably,” Argrave nodded. “I think... oh, I remember what’s there. Rudimentary golem knowledge, and another something far more important: the first piece to the puzzle that is the nightmarish Iron Giants.” Argrave tapped Anneliese’s hand. “We’re going to be glad we don’t have to deal with those things when the time comes. Fun to fight, though. Err, forget I said that.”

“Your knowledge...” Orion spoke up, and Argrave turned his head. “Sometimes, it overwhelms my mind.”

Argrave shrugged. “Try remembering all of it. You conflate fiction with reality, reality with fiction, all in this strange homogeneous memory porridge that makes you doubt yourself at every turn... I guess it’s an advantage in the end, but still.”

“Elenore seems to have things at hand,” Orion noted. “We head to the Bloodwoods, the land of the wood elves. Only they prevailed against my father on the field of battle. Though ancient evils reawaken on our exalted soil today, they never died in those forests. Giants and worse roam. Even the trees themselves are thousands of feet tall.” He focused on Argrave. “What might transpire there?”

Argrave blinked blankly for a few seconds—the way Orion talked caught him off guard, sometimes. He shook his head and said, “Well, I want to figure out exactly what happened. I heard about some... natural disaster... that wiped out a fortress, perfectly coinciding with a larger-scale attack from Yettles—little warriors made of wood, about ye tall,” Argrave demonstrated, holding his hand about three feet off the ground. “Pretty dangerous. They can attach to you, drain your blood. And their thorns usually have disease.” He looked to Anneliese. “You learned that B-rank [Cure Disease], though. Should be fine.”

Orion nodded, then tilted his head. “What can you learn by coming here? And depending on what you learn, what can you do?”

Argrave turned around on his chair. “If you’ll notice, Gerechtigkeid has never yet had a personal hand in things. That time comes far later. Everything he’s done has been through third parties. He’s corrupting various powers, employing them to his ends in subtle ways.” Argrave scratched his chin. “Felipe was one such example.”

Orion nodded, having been told this long ago.

“Other divine parties will descend before he does... and ruin things,” he said, voice distant and eyes glazed over. He focused and continued dismissively, saying, “Anyway, I just want to find out what it is and whether or not it’s a bigger concern,” Argrave explained. “Like you mentioned, the Bloodwoods prevailed against Felipe in the past. That wasn’t a coincidence. There’s the wood elves... numerous, very

deadly, and with a society that's militarized enough that most kids say 'kill' instead of 'mom' first. Then there's the other major group there. You fought versus a centaur, Orion—he was a hard opponent, no?"

The prince crossed his arms. "He was... hard to strike, yes."

"They roam the bottom of the Bloodwoods in large clans—usually one hundred or more," Argrave began. "They hunt in packs, preying upon giants, great beasts, elves... they only eat meat, you see, and they're not particularly discriminating as to whether or not what they eat is intelligent. When their numbers were higher, they advanced out into Vasquer to capture humans." He looked around, and both Anneliese and Orion were entranced. "They were so fierce the elves took to the trees for shelter, building homes far above the ground. The centaurs adapted to hunt with marksmanship, building great bows far taller than you or me—then, the elves adapted again, so on and so on. It's a very brutal place with a long history of internecine warfare between the two intelligent species of the land. If they didn't fight with each other, perhaps they'd have taken over this continent by now."

"Is that what comes?" Orion asked seriously. "A great conqueror, born among the nomads?"

Argrave smiled. "A universal ruler, you might say. No. The centaurs have a lot of trouble doing that whole unification thing." He turned back around to finish his meal. "And if I have it my way, we'll approach this through diplomacy instead of hostility. Might be difficult, but what isn't? No way we head in immediately—until those Veidimen are equipped with gear on the level of royal knights, it's a fat chance I'd ever risk walking into the Bloodwoods. I'm liable to get sniped by an eight-foot arrow flying at the speed of sound. And even if Artur's gear is nice, I don't trust it to stop that."

"Why go at all? I think you could achieve this with Elenore's men," Orion said, still confused.

Argrave tapped the table for a few moments. "Nikoletta's father is still missing," he said quietly. "She did a lot for me way back when. So did her dad. It wasn't... *prudent*... for me to head here, this past month. Still, it's been weighing on me this entire time, making me feel like dirt. But now I have more time." He looked up. "In the grand scheme of things, she got the worst end of things. I want to try and fix that."

Anneliese leaned in a little closer. "I remember what you said to me about this place when you thought you were dying. You mentioned steppes, dryads, malfeasance... about how I should side with the centaurs after the civil war because they are cooler."

Argrave raised his brows, then shook his head. "I promise you that'll make sense. I just... I never expected to be king back then, I guess. Thought we'd be here earlier." He played with a fork. "I'm glad I have Elenore."

Orion opened his mouth to ask more questions, but then someone pushed into the tent.

"Your Majesty, the baggage train is prepared," Ansgar told him. "It has enough non-perishable supplies to last a group of three hundred about a month. Given the... unusual nature of your men, it might last considerably shorter, but it should suffice for the trip."

Argrave looked back. With a decisive nod, he turned back and shoveled the last bit of food into his mouth, overstuffing himself. He rose, using gestures in way of words. It was time to depart.

#####

When Argrave departed from Relize, he did so with energy and confidence. He didn't care to fall into laxness, but he felt confident enough in advancing to the edge of the Bloodwoods. It was a greatly foreboding place. The trees, though concealed by some mountains near Relize, towered high enough to make it seem like they moved toward a great living city.

As they grew closer, Anneliese thought she understood why Argrave had mentioned steppes—the scenery thinned a lot, all trees and shrubbery dying away until there was nothing but empty plains and a single grass-overgrown road. Argrave had to tell her that this was not actually what he had been referring to, which stoked her curiosity further.

And Argrave's curiosity was stoked as he came upon the scene of the natural disaster. He could understand why the reports had been so vague. It resembled an earthquake, perhaps, or a terrible landslide. Thick, long roots jutted up and out of the earth from the beginnings of the redwood forest, having overturned vast portions of land until the meagre fortress Felipe had left at the edge of the Bloodwoods had been mostly consumed by dirt and root. He saw a great many bodies even from this far away. Some were human—others, the aforementioned Yettles.

A new structure stood a fair distance from the old. It was made of stone, newer, and far better manned. Argrave could spot some mages, probably at B-rank. And waiting outside on horseback was Nikoletta. She already rode towards them on horseback. A bird as large as she was trailed behind, and Argrave slowed his horse.

Nikoletta of Monticci rode a fair distance away from Argrave, slowing her horse. She wore the gray leather armor of House Monticci, a faded blue swordfish emblazoned on the front. She'd had long black hair, but it was now cut to be only a little below her head. He thought merely looking at her that her demeanor had changed greatly. A predatory brown bird that resembled an eagle soared about, circling her far above.

"I have to wait months to speak to you?" Nikoletta said first.

"Be respectful," Orion reminded her.

"I'm talking to my cousin," Nikoletta fixed her pink eyes on him fearlessly. "And with my father in a place only the gods know, I'm feeling quite foolish," she said with a tense and exhausted voice as she looked at Argrave, clearly emotional. "Why even come here, now?"