

Argrave stared at Nikoletta without batting an eye even as her eyes wavered on the point of frustrated tears. He couldn't blame her for being distraught that he'd not come to help when her father had been captured. Were his reasons understandable, logically? He thought so. He had to prioritize stabilizing the country over saving one man. But with her father caught by Vasquer loyalists and dragged across almost the whole of the country, reason probably didn't factor into the equation for her, presently.

"I'm sorry, Nikoletta," Argrave said earnestly. Earnest apologies had solved a lot of his problems in the past.

This time, the apology seemed to make her angrier. "That isn't what I asked," Nikoletta shook her head, and the bird above her cried out, drawing Argrave's eyes away. "Why even come now? Had you forgotten? Did my father and I jump into your head as an afterthought one night, *Your Majesty*?"

Argrave shifted on the back of his horse, looking to the Veidimen behind him before focusing ahead on her. "I came to help."

Her firm posture crumpled somewhat, and her head nearly met her horse's as she bent over. "Well, you're probably too late to do that. The only thing missing to pronounce his death is his body. If indeed we can find that—perhaps he's been eaten by the centaurs."

With those last words, Nikoletta turned and rode back towards the fort that she'd just come from. Argrave watched her ride away for some time, then looked to Anneliese somberly. She gave him a sympathetic glance.

Orion rode up beside Argrave. "Cousin or no, that was disrespectful. She should be reprimanded, Your Majesty."

Argrave side-eyed Orion. "Her father is missing. Don't tie the noose yet."

"Does that give her total amnesty?" Orion's gray eyes seemed sharp even through the small holes in his golden helmet.

Argrave looked at him pointedly. "Think about how you acted when you lost family."

Leaving the prince to stew on that, Argrave directed his horse forward after Nikoletta. They took things at a slower pace, giving the garrison of the fort ample time to see the approaching honor guard of Veidimen. As had been the case at Relize, they watched with awe at the sight of the hulking warriors.

There was a small stable established at the side of the fort, and their party trusted their few horses with the people there. They walked through the gate to be greeted by three: Nikoletta, Mina of Veden, and Magister Vasilisa. The blonde sister of the Archduchess of the North was a little taller than Nikoletta. Mina had grown her golden hair out long—it was as though she and Nikoletta had traded hairstyles, with Mina's long and Nikoletta's short.

"Your Majesty," Mina bowed her head somewhat. It was strange hearing her refer to him as something other than her nickname for him, 'Grave.' She looked to the next, greeting, "Prince Orion. And your friend, Anneliese."

"Wife," Argrave corrected flatly, trying not to sound proud.

Mina stared at him with her greenish yellow eyes. "So she's not your friend."

That reminded something he'd said to Nikoletta long ago, and he looked at her to see if she thought the same. It did, evidently, because a small smile played about her lips. Soon enough melancholy took its roots in her head again, and the air between them grew somber as it had been.

"Congratulations," Magister Vasilisa told Argrave, then looked at Anneliese. "I suppose I should call you Your Highness, now. I think you'll be a good queen. You make this man's scheming antics seem almost noble, somehow."

Anneliese smiled. "Thank you, Vasilisa."

"And my niece," Vasilisa continued. "Is she representing my sister well on the parliament?"

Argrave blinked, trying to think. "Svetlana? I haven't gotten any complaints." He looked back at Nikoletta. "To the point, though. That little natural disaster I saw on the way in—it was the roots that disturbed the earth, right? Not the other way around."

"I..." Nikoletta paused. "I was busy fighting those damnable woodland creatures. They nearly killed me. But I... yes, I think so."

"They're called Yettles." Argrave nodded. "Anne, I want you to scout out the roots, tell me what you see. Orion—help me get the Veidimen situated here at camp. I want to make some observations before I press any further," he commanded, feeling it was starting to come naturally to him.

"I can save you some time," Nikoletta called out as Argrave started to walk away. "I've been scouting with my bird."

"So it was druidic magic." Argrave looked at the bird still circling about above the fort's courtyard. A golden flash flew by it as Anneliese's Starsparrow surged out, already moving to scout as he directed. "Very impressive. That means you *have* reached C-rank. I thought so, but—"

"There are a lot of elves on the opposite side of those roots. They very nearly killed my eagle." Nikoletta looked in that direction, lifting her head upwards towards the top of the redwoods. Even behind walls, one could see the trees nearly anywhere. "They're building strange structures atop the offending trees. More of them come every day... but I haven't seen a single one on the ground, yet."

Argrave took a deep breath. "I'll figure things out," he promised.

Nikoletta stared at him. He wasn't sure what she was thinking at that moment.

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Anneliese's scouting deemed it safe to approach a decent way closer. Argrave was beyond curious. Enemies couldn't dynamically transform the terrain in Heroes of Berendar—not enemies you could fight,

at least. He had his suspicions, but nothing more. He wasn't sure a closer look could give him any insight, but he looked closely nonetheless.

"Are you going to taste the soil?" Nikoletta asked him as he stared at the great mound of roots that had overtaken the old fortress like a tide. "Will you cut open a pig, read its entrails? However will you magically learn what happened?"

Argrave's gaze wandered the roots, acutely aware of Mina's gaze boring a hole in his head. Orion and Vasilisa both stood in front of him as though the thick wooden tendrils might come alive again and assault their party. He wasn't ruling out the judgement himself. Anneliese watched with a curiosity that suggested she might not be opposed to that happening.

"I see them." Orion spared a brief glance back to Argrave. "Wood elves. And mayhap they will see us."

"That big tree in the wetlands..." Anneliese mused. "Where we fought that thing that puppeteered corpses. Waqwaq. These trees look quite similar now to it now that we come close. That one was corrupted, but the point stands."

Argrave nodded. "It was planted by that centaur Orion fought. Matesh. He was an exile."

Nikoletta's gaze wandered between the two of them. "When do you intend to go into the woods?"

Argrave focused on her once again now that she'd said something outlandish. "When I can be sure it's safe."

"If that won't be soon, I'll go myself," Nikoletta shook her head.

"When did you become so aggressively stupid?" Argrave narrowed his eyes. "Do you think your father would like it if you died searching for him against the advice of people that care for you? This place is dangerous. You almost died. I didn't think I'd be the one that reminded you of that fact, but here we are."

Mina nodded in agreement, but Nikoletta was undeterred. "What do you know?" she turned her head away, seemingly undaunted.

"About losing a father?" Argrave looked at her.

Though technically true, the words were empty. He supposed he did miss his *real* father on Earth, but it felt... different. Regardless, it seemed to strike home for Nikoletta, and she looked guilty. Argrave thought her behavior was rather odd.

In Heroes of Berendar, Nikoletta had changed after the Veidimen sacked Mateth. Many of the people she knew and loved died. She was colder, harder, and more vengeful in that timeline. He saw stripes of that now—the irreverence, the cynicism, the drive. He hoped to turn the car around before she came to that point. But frankly... he shared some of her pessimism about the situation. The prospects for Duke Enrico were slim if he was in that hell with Rovostar and Georgina as was suspected.

In the middle of the silence, Anneliese abruptly walked away. She headed for the somewhat distant shore. Argrave watched her, puzzled. "Where are you going?"

"Checking something," she said.

Argrave furrowed his brows, then followed after her. Her steps were hurried, and he had to move a little quickly to catch up with her. They walked along the wave of roots emerging up from the ground, and though Argrave was curious about what she intended he was sure she'd explain in due time.

Eventually, they came to the shore. Anneliese peered out into the slowly crashing waves of the North Sea. Argrave looked behind—on the opposite side was the larger ocean, but the North Sea was contained within land without access to the wider ocean much like the Caspian Sea. Her eyes wandered the coast. Argrave waited, knowing well to let her mind wander where it was going to wander.

Then, she knelt, dipping her head into the water. Orion arrived by this point and cautiously inquired, "Your Highness...?"

"Be careful. There's some nasty stuff in those waters. Don't want to get an infection or something like that." Argrave knelt down as he offered that reminder.

After a few moments, Anneliese lifted her head up. She conjured magical water of her own to wash out her eyes, then exhaled. She looked at Argrave. "I saw roots poking out all along the coast. I do not speak of little thin tendrils of roots, either—they are long, thick tendrils, as vast as the pile of wood that we see here."

Anneliese rose to her feet. "I had always been curious why plants do not accept saltwater like freshwater. I could never find the answer, but I did some tests when I was younger before I was scolded for sabotaging crops. And though different, what I guess... what I guess is that these roots are taking in a lot of salt." Her eyes wandered back where they'd just walked. She walked up to a root, then looked to Orion. "Cut this," she directed him.

Though puzzled, he drew his sword and cut it. She collected the severed root and licked it. "Mmhmm," she said, grimacing. "Tastes exactly like seawater." She tossed the root to the ground, wiping her hands free. "I observed a similar expansion around *everywhere* in the forest, not just here. This was no coordinated attack. Something has gone awry."

"Awry? Very astute, Your Highness." Mina's breathing was a little heavy. She had the shortest legs of all of them and seemed bitter about the fact she needed to run to keep up.

"I do not recall you mentioning anything of this scale in our late-night talks," Anneliese looked at Argrave, amber eyes serious.

"Something of this grandiosity... the closest comparison I might draw is that of the Plague Jester." Orion stepped to the coast beside Anneliese.

Argrave closed his eyes, thinking hard. "An event this massive..." he opened his eyes and looked to the Bloodwoods beyond. "So suddenly, so powerfully, and with wood-based creatures moving in tandem... forget the Plague Jester—it could be an ancient god."

"You speak truthfully?" Orion said grimly.

"...yeah." Argrave nodded. "I wish I was lying, believe me. But... yeah, it could be."

"What does that mean? What are you even talking about?" Nikoletta stepped in front of Argrave.

Argrave looked down at her. "It means that Divine Feudalism might be here, already. And if it's here..."

He couldn't finish that thought, he found.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 357: A Measured Response to the Unmeasurable

When Grimalt's new liege returned, he thought that the king looked rather trepidatious. He always had a keen intuition about how others felt, and the times he was wrong was more so misinterpretation than mistake. Nevertheless, Argrave had a strong composure in wake of whatever crisis he faced, and he gave orders to the three Veidimen officers—namely, himself, Bastal, and Rasten.

King Argrave's order was simple: fortify this frontier fortress better against the Bloodwoods. It stressed the importance of haste as though some enemy might bear down on them at any moment. Bastal and Rasten thought that this was a test, but Grimalt wasn't so sure. They dug a large moat in front of the fortress, using magic to aid in this task. When that was done, they left it dry—apparently whatever enemies might come didn't use siege weapons or tunnels, so filling it with water was unimportant. The king himself joined in this task. Though none commented on it, Grimalt could tell that endeared him in the eyes of his fellows somewhat.

But then, all the Veidimen were already quite endeared to the king considering he took one of their own to wife. The queen was named Anneliese. They shared a distinct eye color, so Grimalt felt a certain kinship with her. It made him question what tribe she had come from. He did not recognize her name, but then supposed she had adopted a name from this land when she became queen.

And in time, they might all take names from this land. Those here had been chosen by the patriarch and Galamon based on several criteria. They were all veterans of many battles, they were all faithful of Veid, and they all had not yet started a family. In coming here, they brought with them hopes—hopes that they might make this fertile continent their home, hopes that they might spread the glory of Veid. There could be no higher honor than fighting against He Who Would Judge the Gods, standing in defense of the Mother of Veidimen. And from all they had heard, there was no one closer to the van than King Argrave. Whether they ended this war in a fire of glory or settled into a life of prosperity after victory, none could deny they lived.

That night, however, the king called the three of them to his tent. The king's closest council was there, plus the new faces—Nikoletta, Vasilisa, and Mina.

"I'm going to say some stuff. I don't want it spreading around, so make sure your lips stayed sealed, all of you," the king began, leaning over the wood stove keeping this place warm amidst the cold air of the night. With the roots having overrun the place, there was no lack of wood to burn.

Grimalt and his two compatriots nodded in a soldierly fashion. Anneliese and Orion remained calm, but the other three did not rest so easy.

"Your men have been scrambling about like ants all day, Your Majesty," Mina said politely, though Grimalt thought he noticed a subtle undercurrent of unease beneath the woman's well-developed façade. Human or elf, Grimalt was finding their emotions played the same. Mina continued, asking, "What are you preparing for? What exactly is this?"

"You keep talking, it's gonna be hard for me to get to that." Argrave looked at her pointedly. After a few moments, he cleared his throat. "Talk to me casually, here, all of you. Your Majesty takes so long to say

that it's a waste of time. But to the point: our plans have changed, somewhat. They might change more depending on what Elenore gets back to me with. Anneliese is going to get her reply tomorrow.

"I'll say the facts as I understand them. Once that's done, we can get into my speculation." He raised his hand up, counting as he went. "The first fact: those roots encroached upon a fortification. Second fact: large numbers of wood elves have gathered near the edge of the Bloodwoods, and they're building things in the branches of the redwood trees. On top of that... their wire traps are just about everywhere. Third fact: the roots of the Bloodwoods are expanding unnaturally. The forest floor of the Bloodwoods has been completely overrun with them. A lot of centaurs are dead or trapped and dying." He entwined his hands together. "Which kills part of my plan..." he said bitterly.

Grimalt listened intently, though some parts he didn't quite follow yet.

"As for speculation..." Argrave rubbed his palms together, as though he didn't like saying it. "I think a god belonging to another realm has made a breach between its realm and this realm deep in the Bloodwoods. And I think it's trying to kill the entire forest, so that everything within is forced to migrate into Vasquer." Argrave looked at everyone in turn, letting the silence hang. "I say that 'I think,' but it's really Anneliese's idea—I just stole it."

"After providing the information," she defended him.

Grimalt leaned in, placing his hands upon his knees. "Your Majesty..."

"Yeah?" King Argrave stared at him with steady gray eyes.

Grimalt could see his new liege was eager to hear what he had to say. Emboldened by this, he asked quickly, "We are ignorant of this land. What would a mass migration mean for the kingdom?"

"The wood elves... we might accept them, somehow. It'd be difficult. I've got a guy coming—Ganbaatar. He's a wood elf. I want to see how I might swing some diplomacy. There's the centaurs, too. I hoped to make fast friends with them, but the ones not dead or dying have all retreated to the Mother's Steppe. They'll be difficult to reach there, but also safe there... still, they need to eat meat. Carnivores like them can't stay in the Mother's Steppe forever without resorting to cannibalism."

"But there are other concerns in the forest they should know about." Nikoletta, the king's cousin, looked at Grimalt. He spotted some lingering loathing as she looked at the Veidimen, but he couldn't discern why.

Argrave nodded. "Migration from the elves isn't the concerning bit. There are giants—brutes well over thirty feet tall. Pachamamas—giant herbivores that live in the branches. Those are the primary two that can eat the fruit and leaves of the redwoods in that forest, and so form the start of the food train. Carnivores are far more abundant. The Amaroks are wolves big enough it takes a whole pack of centaurs to take down... and they can walk with the wind, too, making traps or smart formations all but useless. The wood elves use Amarok tendons to make their wires.

"Those wolves fight with the Mishis—panther-like creatures with weaponized tails about fifty feet long, the tip of which are covered in spikes that the centaurs use as arrowheads." Argrave rose to his feet, pacing about the room. "Then there's the only other plant life in the forest—the Yateveo, roaming unintelligent plant life comprised of a digestive core and numerous entwined palpi that eat flesh for

sustenance. I could go on to the insects, but looking at your gaping, horrified faces I think you get the point.”

Grimalt swallowed, feeling a bit uneasy he could detect no hint of dishonesty in the king’s voice. What he relayed wasn’t rumor—it was as though he’d seen it himself, Grimalt judged. When his comrades looked to him for confirmation, knowing well his judgement of people, he could only nod and listen further.

“If the trees die... all of that comes out of the forests?” Prince Orion asked seriously. “You’re certain that’s the result?”

“The trees are utterly essential to all life in the Bloodwoods. You look on the forest floor, you don’t see much shrubbery, grass, or even mushrooms—it just doesn’t grow. The trees there monopolize all resources and nutrients. Without them, the entire ecosystem collapses. If the trees fail, there’s going to be mass displacement in weeks.” Argrave turned around and stopped pacing. “Not to mention that lying at the heart of it all is a god. An ancient god, probably, likely with servants of its own.”

Anneliese nodded while staring at the wooden stove. “What motives do the gods have? Why do they want to establish this Divine Feudalism?”

“This once-in-a-millennia event is a period of opportunism for the gods. Only here do they have unabated access to rivals and contemporaries, and only here can they grow their power inorganically by subsuming spirits—fragments of gods.” Argrave put his hand on his waist and looked up to the hole allowing smoke to pass upwards from the stove. “Depending on how things go... the ‘winners’ decide how the world is going to shape up until the next run of the cycle. It’s like Black Friday, but trampling on other people is *how* you get your discount, not an unfortunate side-effect.” The king smiled, but then as no one laughed he seemed to remember something and muttered to himself.

Prince Orion raised his hand to his temple. “My head writhes.”

“Bottom line: what needs to be done?” Nikoletta leaned in, the fire casting shadows over her eyes.

“Quadreign is being notified as we speak. Archduchess Diana is smart—she’ll take this seriously, take measures. The region over there is mountainous and cold, and therefore not exactly easy to traverse. They have an advantage in case of displacement. But here... you saw it coming in.” Argrave pointed to Anneliese, and then to Grimalt and the Veidimen. “Plains for miles, dozens of little villages nested beside rivers cozily. All those abominations would tear this place apart if they came out.”

“So, we prepare for what comes?” Nikoletta tried to confirm.

“Elenore does.” Argrave sat back down around the stove. “But us... we wait for Ganbaatar. We wait for the royal-forged armor to arrive. We wait for volunteer Magisters. We’ll scout things out with druidic magic as we wait. And then... we’re going on an expedition. A hunt, even. Recover a father, fight a god. Fun stuff.”

Nikoletta looked at Argrave with serious eyes, but Vasilisa interrupted, exclaiming, “Are you crazy? You prattle off that list of bad dreams then suggest heading in there with your pants down, screaming?” She stared, and Argrave slowly nodded. Vasilisa leaned back, crossed her legs, and caressed her forehead.

“...fuck. I need a drink. No liquor in the god damn frontier... why am I here? Should’ve booked it the moment I heard he was coming...”

The Magister stood and walked away, projecting exhaustion from every movement. Grimalt watched her go, confused by the high-ranking spellcaster’s extreme reaction and the king’s state of relative calm. “You intend to kill a god?”

“Kill?” Argrave looked at Orion. “He’s killed a god, technically. A spirit in truth, but a god in practice. I don’t think he’s proud of that. But an ancient god? I said fight, not kill.” Argrave rose to his feet again, unable to stay sitting for long. He walked to the tent flap and pulled it aside, looking out at the titanic forest before them. “Gerry wants to call in a higher power? Fine. That’s fine. But he should know these things work both ways. And I’ve been waiting for this moment.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 358: All Converging

“I trust your journey here wasn’t difficult?” Princess Elenore asked from her desk, staring at the two in front of her. She had four golden-armored royal knights standing behind her.

The red-headed siblings Elaine and Rivien Vyrbell shook their heads fiercely. “Not at all,” Rivien began, a statement which Elaine agreed with a mumbled affirmation. “We were accosted by the undead. Fortunately, my sister recently ascended to A-rank.”

“I had been meaning to thank you for your help with my magical progress. I was able to get one of those Magister hoarders to give me the knowledge I needed to ascend,” Elaine thanked her with a hand held to her chest, her green eyes earnest.

Elenore nodded. “Alright. Argrave spoke highly of both your skills, and I’m short of time so I’ll summarize things for now. Rivien—you’re to become a member of parliament and the minister of Jast. You’re to help deliver the king’s will and the parliament’s will to all within the county of Jast. Elaine—you’re to represent the Order on the parliament. Unofficially, you’re a link that I have to keep track of things in the Order. You understand?”

“I do,” both confirmed.

“This is no joke,” Elenore stared at them with her steely gray eyes. “I don’t want underhanded dealings or corruption on any level. I keep track of things. You’ll be well paid, but well monitored. Let that be a deterrent from any skimming off the top you might be considering.”

“I under—”

“And that includes your men.” Elenore stared at Rivien fiercely. “If there are any rogue agents, your head rolls with them. I trust you know how to spell guillotine?”

Rivien stepped back, eyes narrowed. “Here I thought I was the gangster, Bat. Still hard to believe that it was you I was dealing with this whole time... but I digress. Yeah, we have an understanding.”

Elenore placed her elbows on the table and entwined her pale, skinny fingers. “Good. For the first while, you’ll be helping shepherd plague refugees, facilitate road reparation and construction, and find recruits

for the military. You'll get details—for now, I have something to attend to.” She looked behind her. “See them out.”

One of the royal knights moved to obey, moving the Vyrbell siblings out of the room to prepare for the next guest. Elenore briefly wrote on a piece of paper as she waited, then turned to another parchment that had a long list. After crossing off a point on the list, she stared at the next entry for a long time. She rubbed a golden ring on her finger—the B-rank warding ring that Durran had given her.

“Bring him in,” Elenore looked back once again.

The door opened, the royal knight leading the next guest into the room. She stared ahead, her gaze slowly lowering to keep eye contact as the guest entered further into the room.

“I’m very sure the briefing that was given amply conveyed that His Majesty was seeking S-rank spellcasters for potent, highly dangerous combat.” Elenore leaned back in her chair. “I’m wondering why you volunteered to join him, Artur.”

The stunted Magister looked up at Elenore behind her desk—in a rare display, he walked on his own two feet, the mantle he wore dragging along the ground behind him instead of suspending him in the air. His eyes gleamed as he answered, “Do you think enchanting is only for defense, like that bauble on your finger?”

Elenore instinctively hid the ring with her hand but revealed it again half a second later. “I think that His Majesty made it clear that the possibility of fighting things like the Shadowlander was rather high.”

“Good. Perhaps their bones will make for good materials.” Artur spread his arms out. “I do have my reasons. But I assure you that our interests rather closely align.”

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Far up in the branches of the redwood trees that constituted the Bloodwoods, a tan-skinned elven woman with white hair sat on one of the branches. Onychinusa wore clothes that covered all but her head, and as her legs swayed back and forth the outfit changed in color to match whatever it was up against. The complete camouflage made her seem like a head floating up in the tree branches.

Onychinusa’s eyes were gone—instead, two tendrils of black smoke danced out of her sockets, stretching past the branches. Far, far away, at the opposite end of this long trail of blackness, her two amber eyes looked down upon a stone fortress. They moved about, taking in sights. When Argrave emerged from his tent, walking about and delivering orders, they fixed on him. The eyes moved with whatever move he made.

Suddenly, she inhaled. In not a second later her entire person, clothes and all, burst into black mist, dispersing through the air and clinging to the trees and leaves. Just after, a flash of gold came to where she had been. The Starsparrow hovered there for a moment, wings beating fast enough a hummingbird was put to shame. The bird’s head darted about, examining the surroundings. Then, it disappeared deeper into the woods.

Onychinusa’s body reformed in a different location, wrapped in leaves so as to conceal herself better. She watched where the bird had left for a long while. After a time, her eyes melted away again, reforming elsewhere as they resumed their task of spying.

A gigantic green creature that had been wound around one of the trees craned its body outwards. It was like a great slug, though thick as an elephant and with an armored carapace. The bottom of its body had sucking toothless mouths that inhaled the leaves of the redwood trees right off the branches and kept it fixed to the trees elsewhere. Its mouths travelled along, inhaling the leaves and fruits of the mutated tree.

When it neared the elven woman, she held her hand out and cast a spell. Spirits danced out from her hand in the wake of a mana ripple, and with a burst of purple light the creature simply vanished. It reappeared miles away, the spirits tossing it into empty air. It flailed helplessly, falling slowly until its body hit the ground and shook the earth for nearly a mile. Predators of all stripes descended on it, fighting it and each other in search of a meal.

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Svetlana of House Quadreign opened a door, looking about the room quickly enough her blonde hair became a whip. Someone hailed her, and her blue eyes settled upon that person. She quickly strode towards them.

“Ganbaatar,” she said, coming to sit with the man. “I thought... I didn’t think I’d see you again for a long time.”

“Me neither,” the elf confirmed, red eyes watching her passively as she sat. “But... your king summoned me. I was called to this place.” The elf looked around. “I know this kingdom has grander cities—why does the king hold his parliament here? Beyond the grand fortresses blocking the entrances, there’s only this coastal village with one inn alone.”

Svetlana shook her head. “The king has plans for this place, apparently. It’s not my place to judge—merely to represent mom.” She tapped her hand against the table. “We weren’t notified. What’s happening?”

“The king calls upon me for diplomacy, apparently,” Ganbaatar shook his head. “Frankly, I would have ignored it... but that letter had contents about my people. He gave claims for betterment I could not ignore and promises of disaster warranting attention.”

Svetlana stared at him seriously. “So you’re only passing through?”

“Waiting.” Ganbaatar leaned back in his chair. “Don’t like all of this waiting. I need to find the blue-eyed vampire—a harder task now with the eye destroyed. But considering the man that hailed me is the one who knew how to banish the scourge of vampirism without death... I would be well-advised to heed him.”

“So you’re staying?” Svetlana’s pleasure seeped into her voice, and she cleared her throat quickly. “I mean... how long?”

“Few days—a week, probably. Long enough for all others to gather, I’m told.” The elf crossed his arms. “Something big is coming.”

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Argrave watched as Elenore's men walked throughout the camp of Veidimen, hauling crates in pairs of two. It had to be two—the content of the crates was pure metal, and more than that metal made to scale with the Veidimen. Elsewhere, he saw his three officers Grimalt, Bastal, and Rasten already handling their armor. It was dark gray steel, all, and though unpolished the magic on its surface gave it a particular brilliance nonetheless.

"I've never known the royal smiths to work this fast," marveled Orion.

"Maybe it was that stupid bright gold metal that made things take so long. No offense," he looked at Orion, who wore exactly what he'd just described as stupid. "More than that, I had Elenore tap into her illegal enchanting operations to speed things up."

The rest of the train of new arrivals was not far behind the armor delivery. The bulk of them were common soldiers and spellcasters to better aid in garrisoning this fortress. Regardless of what they did in their expedition, some migration away from the Bloodwoods might be inevitable. Argrave hoped to mitigate damage from beyond this place while they pressed in.

"So, how much longer before we leave?" Nikoletta stepped ahead of Argrave, crossing her arms as they watched.

"Tomorrow morning," Argrave told her.

"It's morning now." Nikoletta stared at him.

Argrave frowned. "I've expedited things enough. If I was taking every precaution, we'd wait a day after tomorrow to let the Veidimen get adjusted to the new armor."

"You glimpsed what hid in that forest with your druidic bond," Anneliese spoke to Nikoletta considerably gentler. "The path we routed to the Mother's Steppe alone is treacherous enough. Caution is well warranted."

Nikoletta said nothing further. She and Anneliese had scouted together, but without a single sign of her father her harshness grew more severe. Argrave sighed as he stepped ahead towards a familiar face. Ganbaatar hopped off a caravan and took long strides toward Argrave.

"You meant what you wrote? You can deliver a homeland to my people where they need not fight again? Where no other races vie for land?" the elven rogue demanded at once.

Argrave held one hand out to quiet the man. "Relax, take it easy."

Ganbaatar shut his mouth, turning away as he ran his hands through his long golden hair. "You expect that to come easily?"

Argrave was going to say more, but he spotted two others—Magister Artur, and an old, wrinkled, and undeniably powerful man. Normally that might mean Rowe or Castro, but there was a third in that peer group, and he was here now... Magister Moriatran, Castro's self-proclaimed rival. The only thing separating him in appearance from the other two was that he was not bald... but his wispy white 'hair' atop his head made him appear only older. Perhaps if he lost that last vestige, he might be their equal. But as it stood, Argrave was very glad to see him. That happiness was overshadowed only by his utter surprise the man would volunteer to come here.

Artur's mantle wreathed around him, carrying him down from the caravan until he alighted on the ground and bowed his body slightly. "Your Majesty." He looked up. "I see you wear my armor. I'm very pleased."

"Artur. Moriatran," Argrave greeted. "Glad you could make it. I know the two of you will be a big help."

"And what, exactly, is to happen?" Moriatran's deep blue eyes turned to the Bloodwoods.

"The war against the world is beginning with a thunderous roar instead of a crescendo that leads to one." Argrave put his hands on his hip as he looked up at the branches. "It'd be quicker to list what's *not* going to happen. By the end of this, we're walking away having kicked in the teeth of a god and enriched beyond belief... or not at all." He looked back to the two of them. "It's an early morning tomorrow. Come on—let's talk. I want there to be no delays."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 359: Wire Net

Orion stepped up a mound of roots, using several separate branches like steps of stairs until he crested the top. He looked out across the vastness of the Bloodwoods, then up, up, and up, at its towering branches far removed from the earth. He turned back and waved, shepherding people onwards.

With the signal given, Argrave's party advanced fluidly up the mound of roots just after him. The van of the formation was Veidimen bearing large tower shields, though just as many without shields were wrapped around the core so that both front and back were protected. The core was, namely, Argrave and his closest council, with its new additions being Ganbaatar, Moriatran, and Artur. The Veidimen officers, too, were positioned to receive and deliver orders.

As they grew nearer, Orion kept his eyes on the branches high in the sky. Everyone else remained utterly silent in anticipation for his order. Just as their party began to near the first trunk of the redwoods on the edge of the forest, he called out, "Movement!"

Anneliese held her hand up. A rift opened in front of her hand, and from it spilled a silver aura that seemed like a cut in the sky. In truth, it was a mana ripple. The queen completed her A-rank spell. A staff started to crystallize in her hands, spreading out up and down—intricate and elaborate, it looked like it was made of amethyst glass. Eventually, the top of the staff blossomed outwards into a great covering, shielding their entire party. The spell was called [Amaranthine Sunshade]—an A-rank ward. She held the staff and ward up above like a torch, shielding them all as they marched into the Bloodwoods.

It was not one second too late, either. The arrows fired by the wood elves high in their tree came in a unified swell, each arrow released within half a second of the other. With both the power of their bows and the gravity pressing down behind them, the synchronized arrows slammed into her spell with intense power. The spell held firm, though it sounded as though a giant gong had been struck. Anneliese seemed to feel no impact in her arm as the arrows sagged off the [Amaranthine Sunshade] like raindrops. Far up in the branches, numerous deep horns echoed, loud enough it seemed to permeate the entire forest. As they did, Orion sprinted away deeper into the heart of things.

"They blew the horns," Ganbaatar told Argrave as they bounded over a root. "Every elf in half a mile is obligated by threat of death to join into a Tumen to resist us. More than that, the noise—"

“Is meant to summon every living predator within half a mile should they fail,” finished Argrave. “Just walk.”

The next wave of arrows pounded upon Anneliese’s mobile ward. The magic only chipped slightly from the numerous impacts, shading all those under it very well. The needlelike leaves and sometimes branches of the giant redwood sprinkled down as hordes of wood elves travelled up above to make their formation. Still, their party was able to press onwards for a time.

But then, the obstacle that had stalled King Felipe III’s army revealed itself—though perhaps the term ‘revealed’ was deceptive. Between the trees, hair-thin wires stronger than steel and sharp enough to rend bone and flesh both barely glinted from the faint sunlight pouring through the trees. They were fainter even than spiderwebs, and far deadlier.

Rather than mechanical, the wires were magical. They had three points they were attached to something solid—two to hold them taut, and another between the two to create high tension. When touched, the tension-generating binding would be released, and the wire would spring into action. They could cut a dozen fully armored knights in half in the span of milliseconds.

But they had a fatal failing.

“There. The wire entries are densest there,” Ganbaatar said, pointing to a spot on the tree as he spoke to Moriattran.

“Clear away the right side,” Argrave relayed. His order was repeated by the officers, and the Veidimen morphed to accommodate the S-rank spellcaster.

Moriattran, still under the [Amaranthine Sunshade], lifted his hand up to where Ganbaatar had pointed. A B-rank matrix formed in his hand. When it completed, he crushed it. He turned his hand upside down and snapped. A faint purple light, no more discernable than a fire’s ember, danced from under the sunshade where he’d snapped. It travelled through the air whimsically... yet when it reached its target, it expanded outwards into the pre-completed matrix. A roaring explosion of fire rocked the redwood tree. That was Moriattran’s A-rank ascension: [Spell Storage], the ability to store spells, send them elsewhere, and control when they triggered.

The wires still needed tension to be effective. By dislodging only one of three stakes, a wire trap could be rendered impotent.

Rather than an advantage, that was one small nullification in the face of an overwhelming battery of disadvantage. They pressed on as quickly as they could, but traversing the roots instead of flat ground made the advance difficult. The master enchanter had the least trouble of them all, suspending his body with his mantle as he hovered along with them, uneasy yet alert. Ganbaatar used his knowledge to spot the wires, and Moriattran cast spells to dislodge them, clearing a path. It was a grueling advance, the whole of which arrows rained down upon them, threatening to punish the slightest misstep.

Soon enough, magic rained down upon the ward, too, as spellcasters joined the archers in defense from the treetops. That proved considerably more effective in damaging the amethyst shield... but in reality, it was a bigger boon to them than the elves could know. Anneliese’s diminished magic power surged with every spell that impacted the [Amaranthine Sunshade] on account of her innate magic absorption.

In the far distance, however... even Argrave could see the wood elves, now. They descended down the trees like rappellers in vast quantities, forming their Tumen—their unit of ten thousand. Their tactics and organization reminded Argrave of the Veidimen's efficiency, and his next steps felt heavier than the last in light of that revelation. Even as their army took shape, the rain of arrows and spells did not cease.

Anneliese raised her left hand up and cast the same spell as in her right hand, [Amaranthine Sunshade]. As it finished, she dispelled the ward, flawlessly transitioning between the two to let not even a single arrow fall upon them. They marched, marched, and marched, bounding over uneven roots in their ceaseless advance towards the army that swelled in size with every second.

Arrows struck the van's tower shields for the first time, a loud *clang* of metal audible even above the din of power pounding over their head. It was a few arrows that struck home at first... then hundreds, thousands. They soon faced an assault as fierce in front as below. That stalled their advance greatly.

"Diversion! Make way!" Argrave shouted.

Anneliese angled the sunshade to better block the van, and the rear advanced to seek its cover. The Veidimen discarded their tower shields, many of them battered beyond belief, as they made way for Moriatran. The S-rank spellcaster held out both hands to the side. His body came alive with light, and a red mana ripple spread out from his right hand. As it ended, he closed his hand. When he opened it again, he held a ball of pure purple light. The other hand repeated this procedure, ending with the same. In tandem, he pushed them away, eyes closed in concentration.

The [Amaranthine Sunshade] was barely translucent enough to see Moriatran's stored spells travel to their destination—namely, two trees closest to the bulk of the Tumen, from which many wood elves rappelled down even now. The mana ripples reappeared... and two pillars of howling flame erupted upwards like a lunging snake, catching many rappellers and the whole of the tree aflame.

And then... as if from nowhere, Orion lunged between the flaming pillars, right into the heart of the Tumen. He still had his brutish, animalistic speed and unsurpassed power. He collided with the elves, interrupting the rain of arrows for a moment as their formation of archers adapted to the lone juggernaut in their midst. In that moment, Anneliese tilted back the sunshade, revealing the front. As if closing the door behind the prince, Vasilisa finished with a final high-ranking fire spell, filling in the space between the two pillars with flames of her own.

"Move, move, move!" Argrave shouted loudly.

With that, their force advanced towards the tree wreathed in flames. Argrave could feel its intense heat with every step he took and was reminded of unpleasant memories in the distant past. The intense smoke from the flame would hide them from sight... for a time. The redwoods here were not as flammable as mundane trees, so the fire would not spread too far. Still, they took ample advantage of this moment and moved at their fastest pace yet, changing directions to their true destination under the cover of the smoke.

The arrows and spells falling upon them had been as constant as rainfall... yet finally, *finally*, it ceased. They managed to advance a great distance without receiving any projectiles at all. When their location was finally rediscovered, the assault that came was nothing compared to what it had been. The forces at

the edge of the Bloodwoods were like a net—now that they had broken past that net, little would impede their progress.

Just as he saw that, Artur shouted, “Move the ward aside, Your Highness!”

Panicked, Argrave looked up. There, a wood elf clung to a tree, a teal mana ripple spread out from his hand. Anneliese moved the sunshade aside, exposing them to the open sky for the first time in a while. Artur surged past, floating upwards with his mantle. He held his hand out. A silver streak spread out from his hands as the wood elf’s spell completed.

A twisting tornado burst free from the elf’s hand, and Argrave could’ve sworn he *felt* it manifest. Artur’s golden S-rank ward barely appeared in time to protect him, though it spread out slowly enough some wind seeped past and hammered into Anneliese’s [Amaranthine Sunshade]. Her spell chipped and shattered against even a weakened impact from an S-rank spell. In time, the stalwart golden dome blocked against the whole of the tornado.

Even with the Magister’s defense, the spell was devastating. The rebounded wind cut deep into the earth and the redwood trees around, changing the terrain greatly. [Maelstrom] was the spell’s name—a simple, destructive writhing wind that seemed to come without an end. Seeing his attack was blocked, at the last minute the opponent redirected the spell towards a tree. The wind bore into the trunk, and as it cut deeper the tree began to fold... fold directly towards their party, that is.

A tree weighing millions of pounds collapsed toward them. The Veidimen didn’t need to be commanded, but nevertheless Argrave gave the order, shouting desperately, “*Run!*”

With the terrain partially cleared of obstructive roots after the [Maelstrom], their flight was rapid, fueled by desperate panic at the prospect of contesting that falling tree. From where they’d come, a pursuing force of wood elves on the ground stopped in their tracks as they saw the tree falling, then started to run the other way. Even the S-rank spellcaster got away, bouncing about like a grasshopper with calculated bursts of wind magic. Argrave recognized the elf—the Myriarch of a Tumen, his name was Batbayar.

But Artur stayed suspended in the air, staring up at the tree. Argrave was in no position to tell him to run, so he simply did so himself, feeling very genuinely that this might be the end. When the several thousand-ton tree struck the diminished golden ward, it shattered it like a hammer against glass. Artur surged to its side as it passed, then cast another high-ranking spell. A hammer of wind struck the side of the falling tree, changing its direction.

The impact as it met the earth was devastating enough Argrave could feel it through the ground. He looked back, heavy of breath, and utterly relieved that he’d lived.

“Move, Argrave!” Nikoletta reminded him, grabbing his wrist and running towards where Mina and the rest were.

And so they moved. He realized belatedly when Artur rejoined them that the ground troops pursuit would be greatly mitigated by that tree. They ran, ran, and ran through the winding roots, still pursued by archers in the trees.

And yet finally, within the rotted stump of a great tree... he saw a descent into the earth that marked their destination. All of them ran towards it with unabated enthusiasm even in their tight formation, as though it offered some hope of freedom. He heard the howl of wolves far, far behind, signaling the coming monsters.

Once within the cave, all of them collapsed to the floor, breathing heavily. Argrave leaned up against a cave wall as the last of the Veidimen entered. Anneliese stood at the entrance, then cast a spell to light the way. Orion was the last to enter. He looked like Argrave felt—battered, with bent armor.

Mina, who sat beside him, said as she breathed, “Very diplomatic... talk with those elves. I feel the... understanding. Your friend was very... useful,” she finished, then paused to drink water.

Argrave said nothing as he caught his breath. “They met us with arrows instead of warnings.” He turned his head to Ganbaatar. “We need to get them to the table, first. I never expected an immediate talk, otherwise I would’ve used my Blessing. We can do it. That’ll take a little initiative.”

Ganbaatar, also exhausted, gave a few nods at Argrave.

He rose to his feet, conjuring water to drink. He wiped his mouth after. “You alright, Orion?” the prince nodded. “Good work, everyone. Stellar work, Artur.” He looked to the Magister. “We assess, treat injuries if any, and then we move. This is centaur territory now. More manageable... but not safe at all.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 360: Holy, Holy Mother

The capital of the wood elves in the Bloodwoods was not grand at all. It couldn’t be, for it never stayed in one place for too long. The only thing notable about it was that it was a true building, and presently surrounded by an army well-prepared for war. It looked like a longhouse placed atop a thick branch, supported by curling branches. It had only two entrances, one on each side. Within its largely empty halls, four stood with a rigid posture and alert red eyes.

A man entered into the doorless entryway of the hall, landing gracefully. He brushed his hands off and stepped toward the waiting four. With golden blonde hair and eyes wholly red, each of them looked greatly alike. One had to study their faces closely for differences, but even then they were remarkably uniform. All save one, that is—there was one female in their number.

“We greet the Supreme Myriarch,” the four waiting elves said in tandem as he moved to them.

“At ease,” he commanded them at once, and they lowered their hands back behind their back. “I received word that there was a heavy engagement with the Holy Army of the Wind in the south. Batbayer—that was your station. Report details of this force.”

“Sir,” Batbayer began, stepping out of rank and file from the other three. “This group entered from the south at the first quarter of dawn. They numbered three hundred and eleven. Nine of them were spellcasters of probable high ranking. Three were confirmed as A-rank. One was confirmed as S-rank. Others cast no spells, but observation of their magic quantity from myself and my juniors suggests they may be B-rank or higher. Three hundred others were identified as warriors the humans call snow elves. One among their number—one who gave orders—resembled the leader of the invasion against us years ago.”

The Supreme Myriarch clenched his fist at the last part, then nodded. "Report what happened."

Batbayar did not hesitate a second in responding, "We attempted to intercept, but they managed to reach a forbidden area before they could be stopped. Though we made heavy use of arrow and spell rain, all attacks were intercepted by a ward. My Tumen was diverted by a high-ranking spell of flame, and personal intervention from a monstrous warrior caused the formation to collapse. My personal attempt to intercept their force with an S-rank spell was met with a counter of the same rank. They sustained no casualties, and the interception was a complete failure."

The myriarchs looked briefly shocked at the news that not even one of their foes had died, but their military discipline kept their surprise from leaking into their posture. They looked at Batbayar not with disdain, but with sympathy. Their camaraderie was undeniable from their gaze alone.

"What forbidden area, myriarch?" the Supreme Myriarch questioned.

"They sheltered in the entrance to the holy land of the centaurs, sir." Batbayar stared unflinchingly.

"From scout observation, that was their target from the beginning."

Stress seemed to overwhelm their supreme leader for a moment, and he caressed the ridge of his nose before remembering his place.

"I haven't wanted to do this... but it must be. I have three Tumens locked in dealing with the anomaly in the northern forest. With four Tumens, we lack the manpower for a total screen of all exits from the centaur's holy land." He looked to the myriarch to his left. "Myriarch Otgon. You are to take your Army of the Roots and head to all known exits from the centaur's holy land. Take whatever measures necessary to block them off."

"Yes, Supreme Myriarch," the man in question pounded his fist against his heart.

"Respectfully, sir, I believe another course of action should be taken." Batbayar, too, made the same gesture of fist upon heart. "We cannot risk provoking the centaurs to action while dealing with the forest-wide changes. It may be a message from the old gods."

"There are no gods in these woods. If there were, they've long abandoned us," the female myriarch butted in. "Even if it were, the roots expanding has been a blessing. We can walk upon the ground without fear of centaurs."

"Silence, Altan," the Supreme Myriarch commanded. "Religion is a personal matter. We all struggle in the same woods, so beliefs are to be kept private. You are to flog yourself twice in private for speaking out of turn in a military meeting." He turned his gaze to the next. "Batbayar. For your failure to intercept foes, you are to flog yourself twenty times while those that were injured in the battle watch. For my failure to properly allocate troops to the south, I will flog myself twenty-two times before you, my myriarchs. Let this pain remind us to never make this mistake again. Such is our responsibility as leaders, and the price of power."

The Supreme Myriarch stepped away to retrieve a flog. As he walked, Batbayar closed his eyes. A face flashed in his mind... an elven face with blonde hair and red eyes, standing just beside the man that resembled the leader of the human invasion years past.

Ganbaatar... what have you brought to your home? Ruin? Or... something else?

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The caverns that their party entered were massive and complex... but that worked to their advantage, Argrave supposed. There were many entrances and exits to this place, each and all leading to holy ground of the centaurs. Maybe in the distant past he would have been able to direct their party through this place by memory. No longer—things were familiar, but only that and nothing more. Anneliese's Starsparrow was an able scout even in the dark, however.

"Her Highness..." Moriattran mused as she scouted ahead. Despite his age, he seemed the least exhausted of all of them—that befuddled Argrave, but he supposed it was enchantments. "Her ascension is powerful. An impressive display."

"Impressive only because she uses it better than anyone else could," Argrave nodded, missing no chance to brag about Anneliese. He saw her ears grow a little red as she sent her Starsparrow ahead and smiled broadly as he watched her work.

"Castro was saying that you intended to ascend to A-rank," Moriattran followed up, staring at him cautiously. At that, Artur and Vasilisa both paid a little more attention. "Did you lie?"

"I'll do it here, probably in a few days," Argrave said, then looked at Ganbaatar. "I had intended to reach the place in question through a different path at the edge of the woods, but given the troubles I'm forced to do it at a rather dangerous location."

The wood elf closed his eyes as Argrave spoke and shook his head but said nothing. Neither did Moriattran, for that matter. Argrave couldn't get a grasp of the S-rank Magister's personality, whether it had been in Heroes of Berendar or here in this reality. He was Castro's 'rival,' but the Tower Master ignored the proclamation and paid him little mind. One might expect a person who proclaimed themselves another's rival while being ignored to be boisterous and obnoxious, or perhaps arrogant and sarcastic like Rowe. The old man was neither, thus far—he was quiet, speaking only when he had direct questions or answers while offering no opinions whatsoever.

And Artur... his defense of their party had been so stalwart Argrave still couldn't erase that scene from his mind. What was the man's game? Argrave couldn't say. He'd been nothing but generous. Intuition dictated that spelt trouble. Then again, perhaps he was being unduly prejudiced.

"Artur," Argrave called out. "You used up all of your magic reserves, more or less. Are you fine with that?"

"Did Your Majesty wish to be crushed? My apologies," said the Magister with a facetious smile from atop his mantle.

"I was more worried that your enchantments might not have magic to draw on." Argrave shook his head.

"I've... enough," Artur said simply. "And others to protect me, besides."

Argrave nodded stiffly. Spotting a flash of gold move in his vision, he realized what it was and said at once, "Find anything?"

"I did," Anneliese confirmed, her Starsparrow returned. "A path. Heavily patrolled, however. Argrave, that place..." she trailed off, awe in her voice.

"I know. Quite the sight, don't you think?" He put his hand on her shoulder. "As for the patrols, let my pups do their work."

As though called, the Brumesingers descended down Argrave's body, scampering out across the floor. They let out their eerie chiming, then vanished into the mist they conjured. Everyone watched with surprise—most of them didn't even know Argrave had the pets on him. They had become so omnipresent that he forgot sometimes, himself, almost like they were an extension of his body by this point.

"I'll lead," Argrave called out. "Moriatran—you're needed for illusions. None of the centaurs are above B-rank, so nothing too grand, please."

"Hold on—illusions?" Mina cut in as Moriatran readied himself. "Your Majesty... you don't think of me for this?"

"You're C-rank, aren't you?" Argrave narrowed his eyes.

"B-rank, for illusion magic at least," Mina shook her head. "Even for C-rank, I doubt they'd send people capable of seeing past my illusions on common patrols," Mina shook her head. "And my spells are fine-tuned, custom made. I swear to you, I can handle this."

Argrave looked at Anneliese for thoughts, and she gave a quiet shrug. With that ringing endorsement, Argrave looked at her and nodded. "Alright. Let's go, Mina."

They advanced through the caverns. As Anneliese said, the centaurs patrolled the vast caverns diligently. They were easy to hear, for most were armored in steel. They were easy to see, too, standing at well over ten feet tall. The sheer size of the beasts enabled their party to take smaller, branching paths in the cavern where they could not enter.

But beyond the occasional lucky bout... Mina was hard-pressed to provide illusions thorough enough for their entire party. But regardless of how hard she was pressed, she rose to the task ably. She seemed almost eager to make herself useful. It was a great relief to Argrave, who did not wish to expend his Magisters' magic supply too much.

After hours of their steady advance, Nikoletta spoke to Argrave in a moment of rest in a low-ceiling cavern where the centaurs could not enter.

"I'm sorry, Argrave," she said out of the blue.

"What, did you step on my foot or something?" he questioned, thinking nothing of it. "Didn't even notice."

"No," Nikoletta said. "I'm sorry for acting like my father is more important than the kingdom. I know why you did what you did. It's just..."

Argrave stared at her, but he could think of nothing to say. Just then, Anneliese cut in, saying, "Argrave, something unusual...!"

A horn echoed throughout the cavern, interrupting Anneliese before she could say more. It was loud enough Argrave almost covered his ears... and worse yet, it came from deeper within the cavern.

"What's going on?" Argrave stepped closer to Anneliese.

"All of them... everyone in the cavern is coming back," she answered quietly.

Argrave briefly panicked before he remembered they were in a low-ceiling area where the centaurs could not reach. He heard the distant rattle of armor and hooves as the centaurs galloped through the caverns, heading further in.

"An emergency of some kind. We take this as an opportunity," Argrave decided. "Come. Hurry, everyone."

Though Grimalt expressed some concern, Argrave knew that an advantage had to be pressed when it was seen. At some point, this arduous advance of theirs would be discovered. From there, things could get very sticky. He needed to take this chance. Argrave led with Orion diligently moving with him.

They raced through the caverns, following Anneliese's path without much variation. As she said, no more guards patrolled the area. What might've taken hours with their old strategy became minutes, and their advance was untroubled by any. True light poured through instead of false light from magic, and they slowed their advance.

"This is it," Anneliese told Argrave.

Argrave hesitated at the top. Then, mustering some courage, he peeked his head up, peering beyond.

The place ahead was vast. Though contained by a cavern roof, he could not see a cave wall on the opposite side. There was only an endless sheet of ice, meters thick. The ice was oddly translucent, with faults within making it seem like blue crystals. It was a frozen underground lake. Centaurs walked across it in thousands, all heading towards a large gathering place in the center.

One could see the bottom of this frozen lake. The lake floor was a vast grass plain frozen in time. One could see creatures caught mid-stride—horses, herds of cows, pigs... none of the animals of the Bloodwoods, certainly. It looked like a little pocket of grassland, preserved and maintained. But most eye-catching...

There was a gargantuan woman at the bottom of this frozen lake. Argrave couldn't call her human, but she appeared human. She wore a strange white foreign dress, almost Romanesque. Probably well over seventy feet tall, she rested in serene peace. Notably, she was the only thing in that suspended scene that moved, her chest rising up and down as she breathed in deep sleep. Her hair shone like the sun, dreaded into sixty separate pieces that illuminated the whole cavern from their spot draped across the grassland.

"The Mother's Steppe," Anneliese said.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded. "Sarikiz. The centaurs' Holy Mother, and once good ally to the elven gods—enough to link their divine realms together, at least partially. But to us... here's the boot we need to kick in the teeth of a god. And with Gerechtigkeits meddling, weakening the border between realms, we're going to try out my idea."