

When Argrave finished demanding cooperation from Chiteng, he felt a little lightheaded from the rush that brought on. He managed not to do anything foolish or embarrassing in the wake of that, though he furiously replayed what he'd said in his head to make sure he'd said nothing overtly disrespectful. He hung on every word uttered, thinking of how it might be interpreted... then wondered if his interpretation was fruitless, because he couldn't think as a god could.

Still, Argrave did not come this far to submit to the advent of the gods so meekly. He fought against Gerechtigkeits—if he bent before the elven gods or the Qircassian Coalition, he'd failed before he'd even begun. If anything, this meant that old Gerry viewed Argrave as a bigger threat than the Qircassians, for he intended to use them to snuff out Argrave. That realization made Argrave only more certain his choice was the right one.

Still, his brain whirled as he thought of what he'd said and what he needed to do. He barely processed, then, when Chiteng raised his hand up and pointed.

"Return," the elven god said simply, voice as loud and disruptive as it ever was.

Argrave stared up, trying to make sense of that. He heard something behind him and looked back to see the great whale that had carried them here swimming back to the ivory harbor, placing its broad head up against the side so as to give them a ride once more. When Argrave looked back to Chiteng for further explanation, he saw the god had closed his eyes, leaning his face against his fist while his elbow braced on the armrest.

Return. What did that mean? Argrave wished to ask a thousand more questions... but given that Chiteng had thus far only laughed a couple times, said a name, and said one word, it was safe to say Argrave couldn't expect a further elaboration. He took slow steps away, walking backwards until he nearly collided with Orion. The prince grabbed and steadied him, giving him a wordless nod. Then the two walked back to the whale.

As the beast slowly swam away from the harbor back to the island, Argrave watched the elven god sit seemingly in stasis. He couldn't tell whether he'd failed utterly, failed slightly, or simply delayed things for another day. But he was alive. He was alive, and other things needed doing.

Argrave realized that Orion was staring at him. He was perplexed for a few moments but saw the prince fidgeting with his hands and remembered his earlier order.

"You can talk again," Argrave told him. "Still... don't think we're alone here, ever."

"What was the outcome?" Orion asked the question Argrave himself had been pondering.

In response, Argrave stayed silent. Things weren't necessarily over vis-à-vis negotiation. There was more that could be said and more that could be done. There were other gods that could be spoken to if Chiteng refused. He wouldn't stop—*couldn't* stop—until things were done right. He'd go, go, and go until they bent or gave in. And if they didn't bend, if they never listened... he could rouse Sarikiz, rouse other primeval forces. If necessary, he'd be willing to do anything to win on his terms... because Argrave

knew that his terms would be better than any that a god would be willing to offer. Anneliese and Artur both had been completely right—there was no place in life for self-pity.

When Argrave opened his eyes once more, he laid eyes upon that door Chiteng had called to allow him to return back to the mortal realm. That made him remember half the reason he had come here—to ascend to A-rank. Argrave took a deep, anxious breath as they neared the shore once again.

“I’m going to ascend to A-rank real quick,” Argrave said to Orion with bravado he did not feel. “After, we can discuss our next move.”

#####

Castro sat at his desk, writing something by the light of a magic lamp. He was completely ignorant of heavy footsteps and a single heavy staff sounding through his chamber.

“Is that the moon I see reflecting all that light, or a bald head?”

Castro looked up, surprised. He narrowed his eyes in the dim light, and then rose to his feet. “Rowe? What in the gods’ name are you doing here?”

Rowe the Righteous, ancient-looking Veidimen of the distant continent of Veiden, strutted through into the Tower Master Castro’s chambers with his staff in his right hand and a book in his left. “You gave me access to your tower, remember? That elevator you have... took me half an hour to get up here. What’s the damn point of something this tall? You’re surrounded by grassland—save yourself some time, build simple, wide buildings. Could have a city here. Instead, you have some stupid monument.”

Castro stepped around his desk. “I didn’t build it.”

“When it’s destroyed by Gerechtigheit, eyesore that it is... I suggest you don’t *rebuild* it.” Rowe stepped up to him. Though both hunched from age, he stood a great deal taller than the tower master. The elfen man held out the book he held to him. “Anyway... here.”

“What might this be?” Castro put his hands on the book.

“Smut,” Rowe said sarcastically. “What do you think? What do us two wizened wizards have in common, hmm? Argrave.”

“This is... oh!” Castro said in revelation. “His A-rank ascendancy. This wasn’t necessary,” he said, but took it off Rowe’s hand nonetheless.

“Wasn’t necessary,” Rowe repeated with a scoff. “You did as much good work fixing that thing as I did. It needed a lot of fixing, granted...”

“He’s not here. You can say nice things about him without fear,” Castro commented as he walked around the desk.

“I can’t risk it. He might hear about it,” Rowe shook his head, then narrowed his eyes. “You seem... off.”

Castro set the book down on the desk. “My apprentice is getting worse. Health issues.” The old man took a deep breath, then exhaled.

“Ask the boy king for help,” Rowe suggested. “He... knows many things, sad as it is to say. If it’s incurable, maybe he can cure it.”

Castro nodded. “He already promised aid. But he is unable, now—not that he’s busy, but merely that he can’t do it yet. Ingo’s health issues relate to Gerechtigkeits advent.” Rowe narrowed his eyes and looked liable to press further, but Castro quickly changed the subject, tapping the book he’d been given as he said, “What do you think of this?”

“The boy king’s bid for supremacy on the magic field?” Rowe tapped his staff on the ground, then looked about.

“Supremacy, you say. So you think it’s potent?” Castro sat behind his desk.

“It was made to be.” Rowe spotted a chair and pulled it up to the desk, not bothering to make it quiet. He sat down with a huff, then leaned his staff against the desk. “But I’ll tell you what I told him: he’s going too fast. If he tries, he’s going to die.”

Castro nodded. “I am well inclined to agree. But when he left this tower perhaps a year and a half ago, he was only capable of casting D-rank spells. Now... he’s mastered a suite of B-rank spells. As much as any High Wizard of the Order I can think of, at the least.”

“Yes, I know. He was very keen to tell me how talented and great he is.” Rowe spotted a bowl on Castro’s desk and craned his head. He reached forward and snatched it—it was full of nuts of some kind. “Anneliese is doing way better than he is. She’s always going to be ten steps ahead, mark my words.”

The tower master smiled at the blatant favoritism but didn’t mention it further. “Do you think it’s viable?”

“Paper is worth its weight in gold in Veiden. Might not be saying much, given how light it is... but paper being as expensive as it is, I still made a copy for the libraries, and I don’t intend on throwing it out.” Rowe snacked on the nuts from the bowl. “Yes. What he described *is* viable.”

Castro nodded. “But...?”

“But it’s an active ascension,” Rowe pointed his arthritic finger. “He has to reconstruct his entire body magically, essentially. That sort of ascension requires a mastery over magic spanning decades. Mastery that he lacks. There’s a reason why passive ascensions are more common by the thousands. When he makes a mistake and kills himself, I’ll learn about it and amend the book as necessary.”

“Passive ascensions are difficult, too,” Castro pointed out.

“Not really. Anything you can do by accident can’t be.” Rowe chewed on another nut, then raised his hand. “Don’t act like I’m defaming those poor passive ascenders. My method was passive, too. I took that route *because* it was easy.”

“And what *is* your A-rank ascension?” Castro entwined his hands.

Rowe stared silently for a few moments, eating nuts by the handful. He set the bowl down empty. “You want to know my secrets?”

Castro stared back, then looked at the bowl. "Well... those *were* my walnuts you just ate. I deshelled them myself. Salted them personally."

Rowe wiped his face off slowly and intently. "And they were good. So what?"

"I thought we were allies," Castro said flatly.

"You first, then," Rowe gestured. "Tell me your A-rank ascension's ability."

"Alright," Castro nodded, and Rowe raised his brows. "We'll play word games, like proper old men. I can give you a one-word riddle. You'll give me one in turn. We'll guess."

"Interesting. Go ahead," Rowe leaned back in his chair.

Castro thought on it for a long time, then said deliberately, "Age."

"Hmm..." Rowe tilted his head. "Limits."

The two old men stared at each other, thinking hard about the word the other used.

"What a pointless exercise," Rowe shook his head.

Castro laughed, then as the silence extended between the two of them he seemed to be reminded of another matter. "There is one other thing you should see. I'm wondering... do you think Argrave can still use this?"

Castro opened his desk, rummaging through various papers. Rowe waited patiently, and then received a stack of papers from Castro.

"Blood Infusion..." Rowe read it quietly. His face shifted as he neared the end of the first page.

"Making *all*- spells blood magic?"

"That's right," Castro nodded. "This was Argrave's independent research paper back when he was still an acolyte of this Order. It's not finished. In conversation, he implied one would need to be A-rank to make use of it. My own thoughts are that it would need to be a blood-magic related ascension, specifically... but I'm not sure."

Rowe raised the papers up. "This is a little bit more than one page. I can't tell you immediately if it's viable."

"So when you come back next time, tell me then," Castro nodded.

Rowe looked a little pleased at the invitation but hid that fact well. "Sure. Next time," he agreed.

Castro's face slowly turned into a frown as he thought of something. "I know I gave you access to the tower as you wish, but... how *did* you get here?"

"Dragon, of course," Rowe said, looking back to the papers.

The tower master looked quite concerned. Suddenly, something fell in the other room, clanging noisily.

"Do you have guests? A girlfriend, maybe?" Rowe said, the picture of calm.

"No, that's..." Castro slowly rose to his feet. He froze as Ingo, his apprentice, stumbled into the room.

Ingo's eyes bled. He clung to the wall as he said in a half-groan, "Twenty thousand hands... traitors, all."

Then, he collapsed on the ground. Castro moved quickly, throwing over the chair as he rushed to the young man. Rowe stood uneasily and stepped over.

"Ingo? Stay with me. Ignore the visions," Castro directed him as he turned him over and supported his head.

"Dimocles' guillotine... a shadow trailing, bigger than the darkness man faces ahead...."

Castro cast a spell. Ingo's shaking stopped, and the bleeding slowed. The tower master let out a slow sigh.

"Prophetic visions?" Rowe questioned. "Some apprentice."

"Not prophetic," Castro disputed. "Ingo sees what is. If someone is throwing a punch... he'll see the punch, but not whether it'll hit or land. He sees only that it's happening."

Rowe stepped around to get a better look at the blue-haired young man. "Who's Dimocles?"

"I don't know," Castro shook his head. "He's been having so many of these... fits, lately. All of them... chaos. Chaos, war, and destruction. The fact we've seen none of it concerns me."

"Humans aren't the only ones on this world, you realize. And the Veidimen have seen chaos enough." Rowe sighed. "Things are coming to a head. That's the larger reason I'm here. I'm ashamed to even utter these words, but... we need help. Anything you can spare."

Castro looked at Rowe, sobered and serious. "By His Majesty's order, I'll help where I can."

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 367: Not the First Time**

"I'll be watching," Vasilisa told Argrave. "But like I said, it's not like there's much I can do to help. This is your battle, not mine."

Argrave nodded at her, then turned his head back to the ocean ahead. Most of his clothes barring his underclothes had been removed and set aside. He knelt in the sand before the bloody ocean, facing Chiteng. He didn't know why, but he couldn't be at ease unless the giant elven god was in his sight. He didn't think he was in danger, yet even still he couldn't dispel this idiosyncrasy of his.

He had gone through this procedure in his head half a thousand times. Even then, he wasn't quite sure he'd be able to do it right, so he ran through it again. The fundamentals of this A-rank ascension had been peer reviewed by peers that weren't really peers—namely, they were people *far* better than him at magic. People like Anneliese, Castro, Rowe, Vasilisa, Hegazar, Vera, and essentially every powerful friend he'd made had their hands on this process of Argrave's.

They had refined the method greatly. Argrave thought that his undying soul was a clear and necessary element for this procedure, but Rowe and Castro had analyzed that idea and applied it to a normal soul. After redevelopment, they made it work with *any* person, not just someone who so happened to be very lucky and born with an undying soul. Or unlucky, depending on whether or not a necromancer got their hands on them.

Having an undying soul amplified the power of this A-rank ascension beyond compare, however. Argrave's base idea was simple, inspired by seeing the vampiric beast within Galamon. He would use his soul as an anchor for what he called 'blood echoes.' Like the silver bracer on his arm currently, these would store the essence of blood magic, eliminating the need for the caster to use their own blood in blood magic. Additionally, they could be projected and used elsewhere.

With an undying soul... Argrave could create as many of these echoes as he wanted. He had the heaviest anchor in this world for them to attach to. And with his black blood, forget blood magic—these echoes could be a store for *all* magic. He could project these bloody apparitions and make a firing squad of deadly magic—deadly *blood* magic, at that. All of this... at zero cost to health and wealth.

The idea was simple. Was doing it simple? Not particularly. Argrave needed to rewire his veins, essentially. It wasn't his veins, in truth—it was more so the magic conduits that drew blood from the body when blood magic was cast. He had to link those to his soul, inextricably. The 'inextricable' part was the tricky bit. These conduits were fussy. Blood echoes were foreign to them, and they liked to revert to the mean.

These conduits would become both the method for the creation of blood echoes, and the path by which A-rank matrixes were completed. It was similar to other ascensions involving blood magic—Argrave hoped that meant Blood Infusion into other spells would be viable for this method. Regardless, he had to place his blood pipes into their proper place.

Naturally, toying about with the pipes made for blood magic wasn't risk-free. And so Argrave came here.

Argrave's breathing grew heavier as he recognized what he was about to do. He held out his hand and cast an exceedingly simple spell of blood magic. He was cognizant of slight pain as the spell completed, but ignored that and sought out the conduits that siphoned his blood into the primal power of the sacrificial magic.

After a time, he found one, drawing away his blood for its purpose. Then another, another, all up and down the vessel that was his body. His will was a tangible thing in his body, like a sparking imagination moving through his body with his hand guiding it. He slowly took a survey of all the spots in his body siphoning his vital essence into magic. One after another, he got his hands on them. He found his soul, too—Vasquer had helped him with this part, so it was considerably easier.

With everything in place, he pulled the conduits away.

Fiery pain lit up Argrave's entire body, yet he stayed firm. He moved these conduits towards his soul, hoping to get them all into rough place where he might then do a more precise manipulation. It was a trying task, like trying to pull fifty separate wires precisely with only two hands. And the pain... the pain didn't stop. The pressure kept growing and growing, pushing out against the container that held it in—namely, his mind.

Argrave felt pulled back to this world with startling clarity. He hunched over and puked blood into the already-red ocean. It wasn't just puking, though—his eyes, ears, nose, *all of him* was bleeding. He heard people panicking behind him—Vasilisa, Orion, Nikoletta. He succumbed to the terrible sensation. Meanwhile, a great budding warmth spread up within him, mending the wounds as quickly as they came. It was the power of this elven realm.

After a long, long while, Argrave felt cognizant of the world again. Vasilisa held him, preventing him from dipping headfirst in the red ocean. Her blue eyes were wide, concerned, and trembling.

"I'm fine," he told her, blood still leaking through his lips. "Small pipe leak. I'll get it fixed in no time." He started laughing when he said that. Forget fixing it—everything he'd done had already been reverted. He'd made no progress.

"What in the god damn is wrong with you?" Vasilisa held him, shaking. "You were *crying* blood. What is this, some kind of sacrifice?"

Argrave wiped blood from his eyes to see better. "Take it easy. Not my first time bleeding from every part of my body," he told her, laughing again.

He finally straightened, then looked at his body. Already, the pain was gone—the elven realm had healed him, just as he suspected. He took an assessment of himself as everyone nearby watched in confused panic.

"Alright," Argrave nodded. "Again."

Nikoletta stepped up beside him. "Again?! Argrave, you—"

"Again," Argrave said firmly, then raised his hand with the spell already formed.

#####

"I was surprised when you contacted me," said a tall blonde man, a steel helmet depicting a boar resting in the crook of his arm. The rest of his equipment was laid out before him, polished and ready. All that remained was putting it on.

"Surprised I could, or surprised I would?" Durran asked, leaning up against the wall with his glaive to his left. He was fully armored in gray wyvern scale, seemingly ready for war. Off to the side, his gargantuan black bear slept peacefully.

"Both," Boarmask said simply. "We didn't part on the best of terms."

Durran nodded slowly. "Because of Titus, largely."

"...yet I ended up leaving the Burnt Desert, nothing done all the same." Boarmask shook his head and laughed.

The golden-eyed man shrugged. "Hey, I wasn't exactly jumping for joy when I left Sethia. You saw what became of me there. Paraded about through town, mocked, called a traitor... I was ready to do something regrettable."

"So, why go back?" Boarmask stared, curiosity lining his blue eyes.

"You must've heard the news a long time ago," Durran pointed, then fixed his dark hair back with the other hand.

"Gerechtigkeit," Boarmask nodded, then placed his helmet down. "I thought you worked under Argrave."

"I did. Do," Durran corrected. "Actually... I was mostly working under his sister in the latter days. Still, she's got people willing and able to replace me. That's just the problem."

Boarmask narrowed his eyes. "Meaning...?"

"Bad things are happening. I need to do something that no one else can do. Something no one else is *willing* to do." Durran looked off to the side. "Plan's pretty simple. Argrave told me Fellhorn's going to come to the Burnt Desert, eventually. Before that happens, I'm going to unite it all under one nation."

Boarmask laughed, stepping away. Durran only stared with a serious smile on his face, and Boarmask gradually began to understand that his friend wasn't joking.

"I hope there's some pivotal details I'm missing," Boarmask took slow, steady steps forward, disbelief writ on his face.

Durran nodded. "About half a hundred. But you can learn them as we go, see."

Boarmask looked a little relieved. "Right. There's no way you'd do this with just the two of us, of course." He watched Durran's face, and when he saw the same serious smile as earlier demanded, "There's no way, right?"

"A nation isn't one person, so of course not. But Argrave started alone, and look where he is now," Durran waved his hands.

"He was the royal bastard of King Felipe III," Boarmask spread his arms out.

"And I'm the sole male heir to the last wyvern-rearing tribe in all the Burnt Desert," Durran pointed his thumb at his chest.

"Sole *disinherited* heir, last I checked," Boarmask rapped his knuckles against his helmet, sighing. "What in the blazes goes on in that head of yours?"

"The whispers of a severed head," Durran nodded. "Want to know a little secret?"

"From you? I hesitate," Boarmask quipped.

Durran held his hand up and cast a spell. Boarmask backed away in fear, but Durran never willed magic into the matrix. It stood there, suspended and spinning.

"I don't know what that is, Durran," Boarmask shook his head.

"A B-rank spell." He closed his fist, and the magic dissipated. "It was... really, really easy to learn. I have no idea why, but it was." He shrugged. "Actually, I do have an idea why, but I think that's best left in my head. Mine and Garm's."

"Do you plan on killing every Vessel in the Burnt Desert with those *mighty* spells of yours?" Boarmask waved his hands up in the air.

Durran chuckled. "I remember you being more somber," he noted. "Well, no. I don't intend on fighting all of them. I can't, really, not alone. But with Gerechtigkeits coming—gods be damned, with Fellhorn alone coming, the Burnt Desert is at its tipping point. The region can either remain forever doomed to be a wasteland ruled by tyrants or divided into petty warring tribes as it was before my birth... or, better



yet, I can make something good out of these existential threats. I can unite all the people of my blackened and burnt desert to fight in the war these gods wage against the world, so that I can hold my head high when I mention my homeland,” Durran finished with his voice loud and firm.

Boarmask went silent at the passion in the other’s voice. He stepped away, thinking. “That’s a nice sentiment,” he finally said when he turned back. “But if there’s anything I can attest to, it’s that hot sentiments mean nothing before cold truths. They once called me the Romantic Warrior. I had to learn that lesson the hard way, but I learned it. And our world is quite the cold one, need I remind you. Vessels, Titus, and tribals who think you a traitor. *That’s* your homeland, Durran.”

Durran crossed his arms, leaning his glaive up against his shoulder. “Believe you me, I know how cold the truth is. I’ve touched that godless ice enough for the both of us... enough to know that I should use it in my favor.”

Boarmask took a deep breath and sighed. “Well... and gods be damned, but I’ll say this: if your plan makes sense, I’ll help you.” He sighed once again. “Can’t believe I said that. After being with Orion for a little, nothing really feels dangerous anymore.”

Durran’s eyes widened. “You too? You met him?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Boarmask held his hand up. His eyes wandered to the giant bear. “You’re, uh... bringing a bear to the desert?”

“No. I contacted a friend of mine—he’s sending someone to pick it up by boat.” Durran looked at the creature. “It was a gift. It’s not that I don’t appreciate it, but I don’t want him burning up in the desert. Besides... that beast was made for someone else, I’m certain. The letter Galamon wrote back in reply was the happiest I’ve ever heard him. And this was letters on a page we’re talking about.”

The bear lifted his head up when the name ‘Galamon’ was uttered.

“See? Mention his name alone, the beast perks up,” Durran gestured.

Boarmask chuckled. “So... what *is* your plan, then?”

Durran looked at him. “Metal people, dead people, earth people, elf people, et cetera. I learned a lot from a friend of mine. I intend to exceed his expectations. His... and maybe a certain Alchemist’s.”

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 368: Crushed From Within**

Argrave laughed enough that it seemed like everything was okay. But with blood pouring from his body in waves every time he threw his head against the wall, and his clearly involuntarily grunts and shouts of pain, Nikoletta could tell that everything was the *opposite* of okay. What he did caused pain great enough it was hard for him to even speak. Yet every time he crumpled, in perhaps half a minute he raised his hand up and cast that spell once again, renewing the process from the beginning.

She didn’t know the specifics of what he was doing to ascend to A-rank, as he hadn’t divulged that to her. In the initial confusion of it all, she, Orion, and Vasilisa had pleaded with him to stop, and then to take it slower, and then to take breaks. Even Ganbaatar, unaffiliated with them though he was, cautiously suggested Argrave ease up. None of their suggestions were heeded. Even the gentle cries of

his fennec fox pets didn't sway him from his task. Argrave blazed forth with an iron will, bleeding onto the shore again and again.

With his body still persisting despite the river of blood pouring from it, they settled into an uneasy acceptance of what he did. They tried to do their best to ease this period of intense pain for the king. Nikoletta found it incredibly difficult to watch, almost vomiting her meal as she watched... yet her concern for her cousin prevented her from looking away. She helped him the only way she could—keeping him from falling into the ocean, cleaning the black blood off his body. And all the while, thoughts poured into her brain one after the other. Questions, in truth.

Why? Why was he willing to do this? No matter what power he gained, was it really worth torturing himself in this manner? Nikoletta thought no one would be willing to do something like this—that no one *could*. Yet second by second, she was proven wrong as Argrave thrust his hand back into the veritable flame again and again, repeating that simple word like a mantra: again.

It was one thing to hear Argrave describe what was going to come, to see the symptoms manifesting all around the world of Gerechtigkeits's advent. It was another entirely to see his conviction laid bare before her. He pursued this path to stop the calamity with conviction enough to turn his body inside out. And why?

She thought she knew the answer to that. Argrave felt it was his duty.

Nikoletta felt unimaginable guilt for her bitter attitude towards him these past few days. She had seen Argrave whole and happy, Anneliese at his side, his brother supporting him whole-heartedly... and felt what she recognized now was only base jealousy. With her sole parent missing, likely dead... with her strained relationship with Mina... she had acted foolishly toward a man who bled enough to turn the red ocean before them redder.

When Nikoletta realized she was crying, she felt ashamed. She'd thought Argrave had changed when she spoke to him again. And he had. Somewhere along the way, he'd gone from the man who smacked his head on the doorframe because he was too tall... to this. Someone bleeding for his country and for his people.

Argrave bent over, bleeding once again. Nikoletta held his limp body up as he got ahold of his faculties once again. As the distant horn calls of the ivory whales blew across the turbulent ocean in what was almost sorrowful lament, she felt a fiery resolve worm its way into her heart.

*I must be more, Nikoletta told herself. I must be better. I am a young girl no longer. How many times must Argrave spill his blood for me to realize what is obvious? If I can do even half as much for him as he does for everyone... it might just be that we make it through this.*

Nikoletta's eyes settled on him firmly, not balking at the blood any longer. *Every drop he spills here today is a debt we all owe, she reflected. And I will pay you back, Argrave.*

#####

The elven god of flesh and blood, Chiteng, sat on his throne of ivory in solitude. The ocean of his creation crashed against his throne, sometimes splashing his feet. Still he sat, head leaning against his

fist. He looked to be lost in thought. His existence was a lonely one, made only lonelier by the haunting calls of lament echoing out from the whales of ivory.

After a long time of complete silence, the god opened his eyes once again. His black pupils settled upon the distant island before him. The human man the others had called Your Majesty knelt there in the sand, staring directly at Chiteng. Then he raised his hand up, as if in toast. When he completed that spell of his... pain and blood erupted.

The human crashed down into the waves, likely having failed at whatever he had been trying to do. When he rose again, they pleaded with him, begged him... yet he did not heed their orders. Indeed, they heeded his absolutely, obeying him no matter how foolish what he did seemed.

And so the human crashed down into the sand again and again, trying and failing to manipulate an intricacy of the fundamental force of the world the humans knew as magic. But every attempt came without hesitation, and in every attempt he stared Chiteng in the eyes even as his salty black blood stained his vision.

Soon, the method that the human used began to change in subtle ways. On one attempt it was harsher—on another, more focused. On one it was reckless—on another, measured precisely. He was like an ant before a mountain, yet even still he traversed it looking for a path his small body could proceed. What was it for? His fellows? Or for himself? Nonetheless, he charged forth without an end in mind.

Even as minutes turned to hours, the human did not waver. He only said one word—again. Chiteng stared without passion, yet he did not blink as he watched all the same. He and the human stared at each other with unspoken messages. Slowly, Chiteng lifted his head off his fist, and sat straighter on his throne.

And then... the human did not collapse. His head sank down into his chest, and he spit out the last vestiges of his previous bloody failure down his ruined underclothes. Chiteng watched as an essence of magic—an essence he was well familiar with, having long ago mastered it—pooled into the human's being. It was the essence of life—vitae. It was blood magic.

And then... the human lifted his head up again, looking Chiteng in the eyes once again as if in message. A triumphant grimace marked the man's face. Chiteng's stoicism wavered, and the debate in his head finally settled.

#####

Argrave stared at Chiteng in complicated embarrassment, feeling that his big talk earlier had been invalidated by half a thousand failures. He could practically hear the god thinking, 'This is the guy that talked about taking down the Qircassian Coalition? What a joke.'

"Told you I'd get it eventually," Argrave said lightly, cleaning out his mouth with his tongue.

"What?" Nikoletta leaned into his vision, grabbing hold of his shoulder. "You're... is it...?"

"Yeah." Argrave rolled his shoulders, feeling remarkably alive. "It's over."

Despite the intense pain and the blood pouring out from his body in volumes enough to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool, the elven realm's innate healing ability had kept him whole. It enabled him to act with reckless abandon in pursuit of his goal. And that goal... he couldn't quite believe it himself, but he'd reached it.

The biggest limiting factor, initially, had been pain. The pain shot up outwards through his body as though slowly building pressure. It became so intense it was almost unmanageable... and then he'd lose concentration, and the conduits of blood essence would return to where he'd wrenched them from. Perhaps 'pressure' was a good term to describe it—after all, just afterwards blood spewed from his body as though forced out. He was like a very gross espresso machine. His extraction time was far off the mark.

After his failures at brute-forcing the metaphorical conduits into place, he'd tried several different ways to fix things. He tried one at a time, five at a time, all at once again, keeping them in place... so many methods, and some of them repeated accidentally by failure of will or simple forgetfulness. Argrave found it was hard to stay focused with pressurized pain pushing against his skull, but perhaps that was just him.

In the end, the method that had worked was a combination of several. He anchored the conduits to his soul, and then used these now-anchored conduits to quickly monkey-branch down the line with the rest before they reverted. It made sense in Argrave's head, but he didn't think he could conjure words to describe it.

And... Argrave had done it. After the distinct and involved experience moving them, he was acutely aware of the constant siphoning of his essence away into these echoes. He held his hand up, willing this force forward...

A faint, dark red hand emerged from his, so faint it was almost indiscernible. The others around him said something, but he was too caught up in awe to pay them any bother. It was there. His blood echo was there. Though he kept calm inwardly, his Brumesingers were freed from their subdued state and sprinted about the shore in excitement, mirroring his emotional state.

"He isn't even listening," Argrave finally heard Vasilisa say. "By the gods, this man..."

"You're right," Argrave said cheerily. "Maybe I ought to clean out my ears. Bit of a blockage, there."

When he stood and turned around, everyone stared at him with some mixture of disdain and relief. Nikoletta plopped on her back, and Ganbaatar shook his head in disbelief.

"You people look more tired than me," Argrave said, then started to realize just how much of his body was covered in blood. "Maybe I should wash." He looked back to the bloody ocean. "Don't think jumping in there will help, though."

"You're... really alright?" Orion hesitantly inquired.

"Of course I am," Argrave nodded. "Told you it'd be fine, didn't I? Why do you think I came here, a tropical vacation?" He waved his hand. "I'm going to go wash myself with magic. Don't look for me," he directed them, then stepped for the tree line deeper in the island.

He walked a fair distance away until he was out of sight, looking back in paranoia. Then his happy-go-lucky persona crumpled, and he leaned up against a tree in triumphant exhaustion. He laughed, aggrieved yet pleased. He'd done it. He'd done something against what he knew of Heroes of Berendar. He'd carved a new way forward for himself. And going forward, he'd do just the same for the rest of this hellish place. He'd make a new way.

Argrave washed himself thoroughly with water magic. The crimson wasn't especially easy to remove, and he gave up on the stains to his underclothes almost immediately. After a time, he returned to them wet. And waiting... one of the ivory whales pushed up against the shore again, almost inviting them to step on its back with its tail.

"It came while you were washing," Ganbaatar informed Argrave. "I think... he's made his mind up. Chiteng."

"You can take a rest," Nikoletta told Argrave. "I think you deserve that much."

Argrave walked over to his pile of clothes and looked down at them, thinking her words sounded quite sweet right now. A rest seemed just what the doctor ordered. But he leaned down, picked up his pants, and made to put them on.

"Nah. I can rest on the ride over," Argrave said determinedly. "That blubber has to be comfortable."

Ganbaatar chuckled quietly, but he seemed impressed at Argrave's willpower. Vasilisa chuckled loudly, but she seemed to think he was insane. Maybe they were both right.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 369: Superimposition**

Argrave stared at his hand as they drifted across the sea. Not his first or second, but his third hand. There was one small benefit to active ascensions over passive ascensions—the effects were immediate. Anneliese had needed to wait a few days, but Argrave already saw the fruits of his labor before him. It was quite a small and singular fruit—a faint dark red hand projected out from his own, so translucent it was invisible when placed before the red ocean the whale took them across. His entire body had this little echo, and it obeyed his will absolutely.

He waved his hand in front of his face. The echo followed his movements with a slight delay, fading like foggy breath into the air. Over time, this echo would draw from his blood just as the silver bracer on his arm did. Once it could bear no more, another echo would be born. And another, and another, and another, for all eternity. They were all bound to his soul, and his will alone directed them as he pleased. Everything was just as he'd hoped from his A-rank ascension.

An idea came to him as he saw the thrashing waves. He started to siphon a great deal of his blood into forming the echo quicker. It was painful, but he still had to make full use of the elven realm's regenerative abilities to skim a little off the top before he returned to the mortal realm. The echo's hand gained clarity, going from a faint red mist to what was almost a red shadow. Before long, he could no longer see through it.

"Given how you're grinning, I can take it you're satisfied with the results?"

Argrave looked back and down to see Nikoletta anxiously sitting on the whale's back. His blood echo, without his will holding it separate from his body, fell back in place inside him. His cousin had elected to travel with Orion and Argrave this time to seek an audience before Chiteng. He didn't know why she'd decided to do so, but he certainly couldn't protest.

"Yeah," Argrave nodded simply, not wishing to speak for long.

And that was no lie. He was very satisfied with the results—it felt like he'd just found some addictive new toy. Of course, he'd made the toy. And this toy was actively killing him, technically. Many things that were addictive did end up killing people, he supposed.

The blood echo suddenly gained enough of his essence to complete itself, and he felt as though it shifted back to another layer within his body as the next took formation. He projected them both from his body, one faint and forming and the other dense and shadowy, its maroon a bewitching color. It required intense concentration to manipulate both at the same time, like driving two cars at once. In time, they would be dozens, or hundreds even.

The whale they rode atop shifted, and Argrave's attention was forcibly diverted as the creature made harbor at the ivory docks before Chiteng's throne. He looked up to see the god of flesh and blood staring down at them. He wanted nothing more than to spend all of his time delving into the intricacies of his new advancement, but he couldn't. Other matters demanded his attention.

*Still... while I'm here, I'll make as many of these babies as I can, test out if my undying soul really is the best anchor I could hope for.*

Argrave watched Chiteng up above as he stepped back up on the harbor. The god stared down at them, dispassionate as ever. He waited on the harbor with his cousin and brother until he heard a faint stone *click* and lowered his head toward the noise's direction.

The towering white door at the base of the throne slowly parted. An elven woman in a red dress walked outwards, her hands held before her in a dignified manner. Argrave waited patiently for her to approach, making no rash moves.

She stopped before them, staring. Argrave didn't recognize her, which was a rarity for important places like this. But that red dress was quite similar in tone to the robe Chiteng wore, so he made some assumptions. He wasn't sure enough to voice them, though, so he waited as her eyes jumped from Nikoletta, Orion, and himself.

Her wholly red eyes finally settled on Argrave. "My father will receive you in his holy temple," she said, not unkindly. "And you alone."

Argrave spared a glance upwards. "Might we speak here?" He made sure to sound polite.

She made no indication of pleasure or displeasure as she informed him, "That would be ungodlike."

Argrave nodded slowly. He was well used to dealing with people that needed to be given a lot of face—counts, dukes, margraves. Even now that he was a king, there was always a bigger fish. Gods ranked a little higher on the social pecking order than kings.

"Lead on," Argrave said.

“Are you sure, Your Majesty?” Orion asked, his voice tense.

“If we’re alive now, we’ll be alive later,” Argrave explained, then followed after the red-dressed elven woman as she walked away. “See? Now you just stand out here waiting, Nicky. Told you it wouldn’t be fun to come.”

Nikoletta crossed her arm, hiding the blue swordfish heraldry on her armor incidentally. “Be careful,” she called out sincerely.

Argrave gave a gentle wave behind his back, then kept walking firmly forward. He passed by the two heavy doors, looking at the intricate carvings on them... and then into the holy temple beyond. He came here knowing what to expect. Between Erlebnis’ creations and the Order of the Rose, he had seen many fleshy abominations in his day.

Chiteng’s house of worship was not like that.

All of what was within idealized purity of flesh and blood—the natural body of the elves. All the stone was as white and clean as the throne without. The ivory halls had only one color supporting them—the deep, dark, and rich red of blood. The two were so starkly contrasting it was a little wondrous when he saw banners of red, carpets of red, and finely dressed elven men and women all bearing red.

The figures here were all beautiful beyond compare, men and women both. Not all of them were so modest as to wear clothing, either. It was like a cult. He supposed religion was just a big cult, and this one didn’t necessarily seem depraved... indeed, they all knelt in respectful devotion to the figure far down the hall. Argrave kept his eyes fixed firmly ahead, using the pain of making the blood echoes to keep his mind sharp.

Finally, the lady escorting him stepped away into the crowd of worshippers, and Argrave turned his head back to see the white door shutting behind him. He looked up at what they all worshipped. An elven man sat in a throne sternly, wearing a vibrant red robe. From the look of him, Argrave supposed he was the lady killer of all lady killers.

“You don’t care to admire all you see?” the elven man questioned.

Argrave put his hands in his duster’s pockets and looked back for half a second. “They’re pretty ladies. Handsome men, too, I guess, but I can’t judge that half given as it’s not my inclination. Doesn’t matter. I found the prettiest thing a long while ago.”

“Perfection is a falsehood,” the elf continued.

“You say that, but love disagrees,” Argrave shrugged.

The elven man chuckled convincingly enough. But he wasn’t a man, just as all the men and women he’d seen weren’t elves. Each and every one of them were Chiteng’s servants. Supposedly, beautiful men and women that died before their time in honorable service to their people were sculpted to become immortal monuments in these halls.

“Can I speak to Chiteng?” Argrave got to the point. “One on one?”

“That would be ungodlike, as you have been told,” the representative said. “We know His will. We can transmit it to you.”

Argrave nodded, half-expecting this sort of treatment. “Dying isn’t particularly godlike. I wanted to try and stop that from happening.”

Argrave barely stopped himself from flinching when that great rumbling chuckle from the god sitting above them shook the house of worship. Argrave’s Brumesingers fell from his coat, looking up above and whining softly.

Chiteng’s representative stood and walked behind the throne. He grabbed a curtain and drew it across, hiding an area beyond the throne. Just then, Argrave saw gargantuan fingers poke up from above and watched with a frown.

“Father has deigned to appear,” the representative explained. “Though the flesh is beautiful, the act of making it lacks propriety. Please wait.”

Argrave watched as the giant hand moved behind the curtain, gesturing precisely as it rolled, kneaded, pulled, and pushed... no, as it *sculpted* something out of view. In time, the hand straightened once more and slid back into nonexistence. A normal-sized hand poked free from the edge of the crimson curtain, grasping it as though to pull it aside. Then, it pulled the cloth off the rails, and the figure standing there wrapped himself in the soft curtain, tying it with practiced grace until he stood with a neatly tied toga.

Chiteng walked out of his alcove to his throne, taking his place atop it. He slouched down until he was a mirror of the lazy, lounging figure outside. As ever, he stared passively.

Argrave thought it would be his turn to speak up, now, but before he could Chiteng said, “You had a bold message.”

His voice had such natural authority that Argrave found himself standing straighter. “I did.”

“You stare me in the eyes and bleed before me, inviting pain and misery unto yourself countless times until you reach your goal,” Chiteng noted, finger tapping on the throne’s armrest. “A human comes before me with that message, not moments after declaring your intent.”

Argrave blinked uncertainly. Had that been a message?

“The boldness of your message resonated. I intend to hear you speak in detail,” Chiteng said. “The Qircassian Coalition in force is beyond my family’s ken—this is truth.” It was an admittance of weakness, but Argrave did not feel the pressure abate in the slightest. “It is my duty to seek alternatives.”

Argrave tried not to jump in exuberance, using the pain of accelerating the process of making blood echoes to ground him in reality. Instead, he took a deep breath and said simply, “Thank you.”

“Another matter demands primacy,” Chiteng said powerfully, leaning forward. “Explain why you bear the taint of another god in your being. Should I take you as puppet for another? Why should one tyrant be welcomed while another is expelled?” his voice grew in volume until it was the same deafening rumble as the giant’s outside.

As Argrave’s Brumesingers yelped defiantly, the man himself stood as though rooted in place.

“Speak,” Chiteng said, voice shaking the walls. “Why are you thusly blessed? To whom do you offer allegiance?”



## Jackal Among Snakes

### **Chapter 370: Collision Course**

“Are you talking about the god’s blessing within me?” Argrave asked with a firm voice—he was proud of himself for staying steady given the walls themselves were shaking.

“You admit, then, that you have the favor of another god,” Chiteng’s red eyes narrowed somewhat.

“No. I was blessed, but I have no favor from him,” he shook his head. “We traded. Bartered. I had something that he wanted, and in return for it he lent me access to his power. I will admit he did express interest in making me one of his champions, but I refused the offer,” Argrave scratched at his ear as he shook his head.

“And why refuse?” Chiteng threw his hand up gently, prompting elaboration. His voice had quieted, so he didn’t seem as angry as before.

“The same reason I proposed cooperation with you, not subservience to you.” Argrave spread his arms out. “I have a duty. To myself, and to others.”

The congregated servants behind muttered, but Argrave stayed razor-focused on the figure on his throne. The truth of the matter was that Argrave thought he’d be better than the gods at making this world habitable. This little eerie red ocean this throne stood on was a perfect example at why allowing gods with narrow focuses unadulterated access to the world was a net negative. Humans were the best to serve humans—*that* was his purpose as king, now. He’d gotten the crown, and now he needed to hold it. It was as much for his future as it was for others—that’s how these things worked.

Chiteng didn’t look satisfied by that answer. “Duties are long, thankless threads that can form impeding knots when intertwined. You propose cooperation. I do not intend to subvert my own duty by wrapping it in yours without understanding your intent fully.”

Argrave nodded, filtering past the grandiose speech to get the root of the matter—he wanted Argrave’s motive. He took a breath and answered, “My duty is simple. I must allow everyone who falls beneath my banner to get through this without painful submission or death. And why? Because I want to live in a nice place.”

Chiteng watched without judgement. “You don’t care for their fates?”

“As much as about anyone else, yeah I do,” Argrave nodded, being quite honest. “The world is better with others living in it. Innovation, structure, safety... that’s what organized and civilized society offers, in large part. I want to preserve that for me and mine. I’m sure you understand, having watched over the elves for as long as you have.”

Chiteng tapped his finger on the throne’s armrest. “The chains that bind are long and greedy. I once thought it foolish that we divinity should fight amongst each other for territory, for worshippers, but death is the thing we fear. The gods will try and make their mark on your people. I am rooted here in the Bloodwoods because my family and I served the elves, earned their worship, protected them, and gave them a home to live. Your life has been short, but many of us have seen dozens of millennia pass by. The opportunism stems from seeking a staging ground for the next cycle, for it never truly ends. We seek to

build a fortress in the hearts and mind of the mortals, so that when next the arbiter raises his judgment we may step upon familiar soil.”

The elven god leaned in. “They will come for all you have. They will try and erode your people’s will with filling pleasures, try and conquer the land by might, try and beat you down with reason honed over centuries. I do not chide your resistance, but they resist all the same against powers greater than they are. In your land, bodies that meet the earth nourish the crops that grow in years to come. For the gods, we need only eat each other to grow stronger. You know this, having offered that silver medallion laden with divinity.”

Argrave listened intently, surprised the impersonal god spoke so personally. At the end of that, he nodded. “Life is hard, that’s what you’re saying. I don’t see that as any reason to give up.”

“No. I say that cooperation is a rare luxury, for the opportunism and base greed of one alone can pervade the attitudes of all into a ubiquitous and internecine struggle for power and supremacy. Such is as we see plainly on display.” Chiteng fell back into his throne, lost in thought. “You spoke sense. Kirel Qircassia has no reason to so meekly allow myself and my family to join his coalition when he could establish his presence in these woods both for this cycle and the next. Experience has taught me that people rarely speak sense without another motive behind it, and I find it difficult to cooperate with one who bears the taint of a power well known to me.”

The god spoke fast enough Argrave felt the proceeding silence after he finished unbearable. Eventually he defended, “Erlebnis is fair in his dealings.”

“Yes. But mortal beings are not bound as he and his servants are by reputation and expectation. He has earned a powerful place for himself in this world by trading knowledge between all powers equitably. Nevertheless, many names have been stomped beneath his feet and forgotten in the time of the arbiter’s judgement. For a god to grow, other gods must die. And your swift arrival in an hour of need bears implications. Your pervasive knowledge, too, bears implications.”

“You need me to quell uncertainty,” Argrave finally realized.

No response came. Chiteng watched and waited, his monologue finished.

“I can’t,” Argrave said. “But I can return the favor.”

Chiteng shifted in his throne, saying nothing further.

Argrave paced as he talked. “I didn’t know whether or not my party would make it through the barrage of elven attacks without being harmed. I didn’t know whether or not I’d be able to lead my people through the caverns where the centaurs patrolled. I didn’t know if I could open the portal to the Mother’s Steppes without sacrificing someone. And I didn’t know, coming here, if I would be received... and if I would live. And I was very far from certain that my A-rank ascension would work.

“If people only acted when they were certain, then uncertainties would never be eliminated. The future itself is uncertain.” Argrave paused, briefly losing track of his point for a minute. He stepped up the stairs toward Chiteng’s throne, then paused before him. “But I see something coming that’s hard to ignore. And the only way I see crisis being averted is cooperation.”

When Argrave finished, the only reply he received was a steady tapping as Chiteng's finger thumped against the stone. "You will need to explain how you will aid in combatting Kirel to my family."

Argrave brightened. "Meaning...?"

"I will stride into uncertainty certainly. I will speak to my family. But they were not revitalized with an offering of divinity as I was—they will be slower to wake. Though your friends have already stirred them, give it time."

Argrave smiled broadly. "Excellent! Then I'll wait a few—"

Chiteng's fist slammed down upon the armrest, and the noise echoed like a giant gong out across the room until Argrave's ears felt like they would bleed.

"But I will not relax my vigilance. I watch for signs of Erlebnis repeated *anywhere*," he stressed. "Return."

#####

"Your absence was noted."

One of the emissaries of Erlebnis looked down at the elf Onychinusa as she sat before the shrine. Its too-long arms were crossed before it in what appeared to be disappointment, but the abominations of the ancient god of knowledge never expressed emotion so perhaps it was merely illusion.

"I was absent only a day," she defended herself, looking up with pleading amber eyes.

"You were told to return, and yet it took you twenty-five hours to do so." The emissary stepped forward, thin lips speaking harsh words casually. "We cannot stray far from the lord's shrines of yet. As His mortal servant, you can. This is a privilege granted to you to extend his reach. If you cannot follow His will absolutely, you will be retained and reeducated."

The woman shuddered and lowered her head, playing with the grass before the shrine in panicked helplessness.

"You will facilitate His descent, here," the emissary continued as though its gentle scolding never was.

Onychinusa lifted her head. "The lord's... descent?" She blinked quickly, a mixture of awe, surprise, shock, and anxiety. "The presence... the presence of that king, will it...?"

"It is because he is present that the time is ideal," the emissary interrupted. "You will get in touch with His mortal servants. You will direct them to do as they have been bid. And then you will return to the shrines, to hear and wait for his directive."

"To the shrines? Not to His realm?" she questioned.

"That was not said," the emissary answered neither harshly nor softly.

She said nothing in response but rocked back and forth on her spot happily. Then, she looked up. "Why does the king's presence matter?"

“He has insight. His purpose is known,” the emissary explained, remaining behind unlike last time. Perhaps it knew the reason she had wandered last time was because of her frustration that it did not answer her questions.

“He has knowledge the lord wants?” Onychinusa questioned.

“Yes,” the emissary nodded.

Onychinusa looked pleased her question was answered, then followed, “Why are these elves here, when I—” she cut herself off, then smacked her face hard with her hand. When she raised her head up once more, cheek red, her question changed. She instead asked, “Is this insight how he knew my name? Not previous correspondence with the lord?”

“Presumably,” the emissary nodded.

She stood up suddenly. “I will do my duty.”

Then, the emissary was gone. Onychinusa took a deep breath of anticipation, and then stepped toward the exit from the shrine’s alcove.