

Jackal 71

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 71: A Prince's Example

At the top of a ridge, five horsemen stared out across the moonlit grassy fields. Their faces were wrapped in simple brown cloths, and baggy burlap concealed steel armor. The shade from a mountain behind hid them from sight. The one at the highest point of the ridge, evidently being followed by the others, was of formidable stature and had bright blue eyes. His helmet dangled from his horse's saddle, bound by a rope.

Their eyes stayed locked on a castle. It was a simple thing—a pentagonal stone fort built atop a hill, with a simple yet spacious keep in the center. Knights roamed the ramparts, bearing torches or magic lamps even despite the abundant moonlight. It overlooked a town. The place was quite poor, most of the houses being shanty wood or packed straw.

"To think that a vassal of House Parbon lies so close to Elbraille," their blue-eyed leader said.

"My prince, there should be no issue in passing," one of the other horsemen spoke. "There are no night patrols, and even us royal knights can pass as mercenaries when bearing steel and burlap."

"I know," replied Induen, tone dismissive. "They seem... lax, don't they?"

"The knights, prince?" one of the royal guards asked.

"Yes," returned Induen, tone pensive. "The most they deal with is probably the average village ruffian. A peaceful existence." Induen extended a hand out. "They watch over this dank hovel, polishing their armor and passing day by day. They might deal with minor disputes, or they might be called to war elsewhere, but here? Dreadfully boring."

The royal knights remained silent, leaving their prince to his thoughts.

"It would be best if someone let them know they are truly at war." Induen reached down, retrieving his helmet off his horse's saddle. He unwrapped the cloth around his head, and then put the helmet on. "It would be better if that person were me."

"My prince... we are only five," one of the royal knights said concernedly.

"Rest easy," Induen assured, voice calm. "Someone told me I should be less impulsive, and so I thought for a long while atop this ridge. Perhaps she was right. But Elbraille needs a demonstration, and my enemies need to know fear." Induen urged his horse onwards, descending down the hill they were on. The knights followed without hesitation—such was their duty.

When they neared the village, Induen slowed their horses into a steady trot, scanning the village. He roamed without purpose, it seemed, but the footfalls upon the gray autumn grass were soundless and none of the sleeping villagers roused at their presence.

After a time of wandering, Induen brought his horse to a stop in front of a place where straw roofs were abundant. His eyes roamed for a long moment, and then he nodded. "Enter quietly. Secure all the residents the same way."

The royal knights dismounted wordlessly, walking around the perimeter of the house. Induen watched from the outside, still on horseback, as his men signaled each other and entered simultaneously through the house's entrances. A brief scuffle could be heard within alongside a muffled scream. Something ceramic broke within. After some time had passed, Induen came down and moved into the house.

The royal knights had the four residents of the home arrayed on the floor, muffled by sheets and clothing likely taken from the house. Two were children, and the other two were their parents. Induen stepped forward kneeling down.

"I'm going to remove your gag," Induen said, voice passive. "Scream, I'll butcher your children."

He reached down and pulled the cloth out of the man's mouth. At once, the man began begging incomprehensibly, the most common word being 'please.'

"Stop talking," Induen said, grabbing the man's hair. "Answer my question. Under what circumstances do the castle gates open?"

"T-t-they open when the lord leaves, when the knights go on patrol, whenever the lord is travelling," the man babbled frantically.

"When else?" Induen shook the man's head. "Use this thing I'm holding."

"To help the villagers, to put out fires, to—"

"Fire. A good idea. Enough," Induen said, releasing the man's head. He stood up, nodding. "You want your children to live?"

"Yes! Yes, I do!" the man shouted at once, and the woman beside him writhed, screaming blocked by her gag.

"Good." Induen pointed to his men. "Take the children outside." Induen kneeled again. "If you want your children to live... once this place sets aflame, scream for help. Scream like your life depends on it. But mention me or my men, I'll kill your children myself. Understood?"

The man started crying, but he nodded frantically. "Don't kill them. Don't. Please. I beg of you!"

Induen came to his feet. "Then do as I say."

With the children in tow, the royal knights left the building alongside Induen, mounting their horses once more. The prince held his hand out and a spell matrix swirled in the air. After a second, a geyser of flame erupted forth, immediately consuming the entire home and some of the ones closest to it. Their horses, not expecting such a sudden appearance of fire, reared and rushed away without the consent of their riders. Induen surrendered himself to where the horse led him, and before long they were far from the village.

Induen raised his hand and a bit of green light burst from his hand like a firework. The scattered light drifted down like green embers, and as they fell, they gave the animals a sudden and profound serenity. Behind them, the flames started to spread out of control, the straw a natural accelerant and the wood a tremendous source of fuel. It was not long before the corner of the village was consumed in flames. People rushed out of their homes, burning and screaming. Loudest were the screams of the house they'd left.

The royal knights were somewhat uneasy by the display of wanton arson, but Induen remained calm with his breathing steady beneath his helmet.

"They... they opened the gate, prince Induen." One of the royal knights pointed. True to his observation, the gate had opened, and a great many riders rushed out.

"Release those two, then," Induen gestured towards the children, who kicked and screamed. "Such a big fire. They'll need all of their mages to quell this..."

As though prophesied by his words, some of the riders came to the flames and began casting water magic. It brought a smile to Induen's face beneath his helmet, and he urged his horse onwards after leaving behind a simple directive for his escort.

"Circle around opposite me. Kill the mages. Once done, wait for me. We'll head for the castle."

Induen led the charge back towards the village. Their calmed horses showed no fear towards the flames. The riders from the castle, spellcaster or no, were too distracted by the fires to see others bearing a different uniform weaving in their ranks. Induen drew his sword, rushing past a few mounted knights to stab a spellcaster in the chest. The man was pushed back, caught on his stirrup, and Induen pulled free his blade cleanly. The enchanted blade left a cauterized wound.

Though a great many knights saw what occurred and attempted to intercept Induen, the prince merely raised his hand and conjured another geyser of flame. He waved his hand as the spell hurtled forth, creating a cone of fire. What few of the castle's knights not hit by the spell had difficulty controlling their horses, and Induen continued unperturbed.

When Induen reached the second lightly armored spellcaster, the woman had already been alerted to his presence. As Induen approached, she held her hand out and conjured a spell. At once, spears of ice hurtled up from the ground forming a makeshift barricade of pikes. The horse could not cease its charge, and Induen abandoned it, jumping into the air. It impaled itself on the ice, and Induen landed nimbly on the other side.

The woman cast lightning magic at Induen, but it slipped off his enchanted armor. The prince rushed forth, stabbing towards her gut. Though the spellcaster conjured a ward, it broke when met with the enchanted blade. Induen pierced her stomach and she cried out painfully. He grabbed her arm and mercilessly pulled her from horseback, dispatching her with a stomp to the neck. Without a moment's pause for breath, he remounted and calmed the horse with a spell. He led the animal around the growing flames, where ahead his royal knights had cleared a path for themselves.

When Induen sped past them out of the village and into the open plains, the royal knights disengaged, following after him. Induen looked back, watching for more traces of magic, but the royal knights were brutally effective killers and Induen did not watch for long.

They sped across the plains, the knights of the castle torn between dealing with the flames and dealing with the intruders. The villagers of the unaffected portion of the town emerged from the homes, trying to aid with quelling the flame using dirt and water to little effect.

Induen and the royal knights entered the castle's open portcullis, the gateman evidently unprepared to shut the gate. Ahead of them, a set of wide stairs led to the main keep. Induen dismounted, and then yelled out to the knights.

"One of you, go up the walls and find the mechanism for the gate. Make sure it remains open. The rest of you, stop the pursuers from entering."

Leaving with those words, Induen left the horse there and ascended up the stairs leading to the keep. Ahead, two men worked to shut the massive wooden doors of the keep, but Induen stepped forward and pushed them away. They scattered to the ground, and Induen made short work of them with two simple stabs. They were left with smoldering holes in their chests.

Induen proceeded into the keep, trampling on the velvet carpet without much care. Blood still dripped from his blade for a time. Three knights rushed down the stairs ahead, each bearing a metal kite shield with a dog on the front and a simple broadsword. They jogged across the carpet, and then stood across Induen warily. He towered over the three of them.

The prince stepped off the carpet and knelt down, taking it in his hand. He pulled it mightily, and though it eventually tore, one of the knights did stumble. Induen tossed the velvet carpet at them and rushed forth. He grabbed the first's shield and thrust at his visor. The man managed to pull his head aside, but Induen kicked his knees and the man stumbled. With a push, the knight was sent a great distance away.

Without pause, Induen stepped forward and stabbed the one who'd fallen earlier in the neck, dispatching him. The last knight still on both feet stepped forward and thrust. Induen swatted the blade up with the back of his gauntlet, incautious on account of his enchanted armor. He pulled his blade free of the fallen knight's neck and stepped forward with a straight kick in one fluid motion. The metal boot clanged against the metal shield, echoing out in a deafening ring across the hall.

"Annoying," Induen muttered. The two knights came to stand side-by-side, shields at the ready.

The prince held a hand out and sent forth a spell. A bolt of lightning struck one's shield, and the man spasmed and fell to the floor. Induen decisively severed his head. The other backed away in fear. Induen walked forward casually, then dropped down and swept the knight's legs. The knight fell, dropping his sword. Induen stabbed him in the visor. His struggles ceased immediately.

"That shouldn't have been that hard." Induen pulled free his blade, and then ascended up the stairs.

Once at the top, he was greeted by a sorry sight. The lord of the castle had not had time to put on his armor—he wore naught but gauntlets, a helmet, and boots. His weapon was a halberd. Induen could tell the halberd had been taken from a wall mount, for the thing lay littered on the floor. The lord waited in the middle of the hallway, and behind, Induen could see a decadent bed.

"This ends here!" the lord said, a middle-aged man with fiery red hair. He was probably a cadet branch of House Parbon, the prince suspected.

Induen removed his helmet with one hand and stepped forward slowly. The lord stepped forward, thrusting at Induen with considerable skill. The prince, though, side-stepped it easily, and caught the haft of the halberd in the crook of his arm. He slammed his helmet against the lord's face, and the man released the weapon, falling back dazed.

After dropping his helmet, Induen grabbed the lord's leg and pulled him up the hallway, the man barely offering any resistance on account of the blow to his head. Before long, Induen entered the man's bedroom. He looked around and saw a woman cowering with a child in her arms. Induen tossed the man on the bed, and he scrambled vainly away, face bleeding.

Induen raised his blade, pointing it at the woman. "Let this be a lesson to you... this is what occurs when you oppose Induen of Vasquer," he said harshly, emphasizing his name.

He stabbed the lord. The woman screamed, and the child cried. Induen smiled. He turned on his heel, retrieving his bloodied helmet. He put it back over his head. Only then did he pull out his blade. He walked out the door slowly. There, two of his knights came rushing up.

"My prince," one greeted. "The pursuers chasing are all dead. The remainder are dealing with the fire. What now?"

"We leave," Induen said. "Few nobles will forget the lesson I taught here today. None are safe, not even Parbon's own."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 72: Grandfather Acquired

"What is this? I'm on human soil not a day and already I have you groveling at my feet?" Rowe asked mockingly. All of Argrave's party was crowded into his room, and the aged elf himself still sat at his bed, walking stick leaned up against his shoulder.

"I think it's warranted. All I need is for you to come with me to meet with these people, keep the peace." Argrave spread his arms out. "You want me to help with your business here in Jast, I think you should return the favor first. Where I'm from, we call this a 'transactional relationship.'"

"You owe help to me," Rowe refuted. "Practically handed all the secrets of Veiden's magic to you, and that warrants some gratitude. You think I'm a fool? Been around too long to be yanked about. This stick here is older than you," Rowe tapped it thrice.

"We've established that it's got a sword inside. It's more a concealed weapon than a stick." returned Argrave, which made Rowe frown once more. "And as far as I'm concerned, I don't owe you anything. We had a trade. You did me no favors. When all is said and done, you and Veiden got more out of the deal than I did."

"I'm not stupid, boy," shot back Rowe.

Argrave shook his head in annoyance. "Yes, we've—"

"You're playing both ends against the middle," outlined the old S-rank spellcaster. "Extorting both sides—human and Veidimen—for your own needs. You used the books from Veiden to secure liberties in your mage order. Just because that 'middle' is Gerechtigheit doesn't change the fact that we're being played." Rowe pointed a bent, arthritis-deformed finger. "That's why you owe me."

Argrave said nothing for a time. He considered if Rowe was trying to get a confession out of him by presenting speculation as fact.

"Where's your proof?" Argrave denied, trying to feel out if it was a bluff.

"You think Veiden wouldn't pay attention to you after what happened on our soil?" Rowe questioned. "We have people keeping tabs on you. We'd notice, naturally, what you did."

In the silence, Argrave heard Anneliese whisper something to Galamon, but he couldn't distinguish what it was.

"Listen, the meeting is this morning," Argrave said with some urgency. "There's an A-rank mage there. He chose an unusual method to become an A-rank mage, and he has [Minor Truesight] consequently. He might notice either Galamon or me being out of the ordinary, cause problems. I'm happy to help you after, but I need this now."

"I don't see how this is my problem," Rowe shook his head. "Offer me something or give it up."

Argrave pushed his tongue against his cheek, brain working quickly. A grating, guttural voice drew him from his thoughts.

"Rowe. Do this for me as a favor," Galamon asked.

Argrave turned his head back to Rowe, waiting to hear the response. The old elf looked perplexed. He scratched one of the liver spots on his bald head.

"A favor? Really?" Rowe repeated disbelievingly.

"Yes." Galamon nodded.

"Fine," Rowe grunted, standing from his bed. "I'll call in that favor now. You have to answer that question I asked you all those decades ago before you were exiled. That one you refused to answer."

The sound of Galamon's teeth grating was audible, and Argrave took a step away, unpleasant memories surfacing. After a few seconds, Galamon slowly nodded.

"So it shall be." After Galamon's answer, Rowe looked pleased, and the elven vampire added, "But only once the task is finished."

Argrave looked back to Anneliese and muttered, "That your idea, his interjection?"

She said nothing in response, merely smiling. Argrave nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

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Argrave's party walked across the plains towards a distant riverside village—Karrel. Argrave could think of few quests that went there and could not recall a single named NPC in the village. Rowe was with them, lagging slightly behind on account of his walking stick.

"So, what question will he ask you?" Argrave spoke to Galamon, whispering very quietly.

The elf's only response was a fierce, white-eyed gaze lined with warning.

Argrave held up his hands. "Only curious. I just can't imagine anything Rowe could ask you, let alone something worth a favor," Argrave pointed with his chin towards Rowe.

"Rowe intends to ask a question I loathe enough that he felt it worth a favor," Galamon said icily. "And yet you think I will sate your curiosity simply because you asked?"

"Can't blame me for trying, at least," Argrave shrugged. "I've got some curiosity in me. It's in my blood. Not as bad as Anneliese, of course, but it's there." Argrave pointed at her.

"You are overly curious too," she shook her head. "But your knowledge has stagnated that desire somewhat, I think."

Argrave frowned. He supposed she was right. A large part of why he had contributed so much to the 'Heroes of Berendar' wiki was on account that he loved the discovery process—both delving into the mechanics of the game and the lore supporting it. Few other worlds captured his attention so raptly. Berendar seemed almost a real place, back then. Now, it didn't seem—it was.

"This place—shoddy," Rowe called out as though in response to Argrave's thoughts.

"What are you talking about?" Argrave questioned, turning back to the old elf.

"These roads must have been made decades ago, and they're just flattened dirt." Rowe dragged his stick along the road. "That city back there, Jast—it was dense with mana, but beneath it all was bureaucratic corruption and rampant crime on account of mages chafing beneath a lack of support from the government and their organization."

Argrave was surprised that Rowe had managed to gain such a solid view of the city so quickly, but before he could say anything, Anneliese said, "Yet despite all that, they managed to achieve more than we have."

"Yes..." Rowe trailed off, head lowering until his jowls pressed against his neck. "It's vexing. We Veidimen are physically superior, longer-lived, harshly raised, and thrive in unity. Despite that..."

"Perhaps it's the environment," Argrave posited.

"Were the environment the issue, our attempts to establish ourselves on different continents would have succeeded. Patriarch Dras was not the first to attempt to invade greener lands. None before him have succeeded." Rowe quickly shot down Argrave's half-baked theory.

"Civilizations here are like moon cycles," Argrave responded seriously, resuming the trek towards the village of Karrel. "They wax, they wane. You've caught us when we're but a sliver of moon, near absent in the sky." Argrave shrugged. "In time, perhaps, that will reverse."

"You believe humans will resurge, even after the advent of Gerechtigkei?" Rowe questioned. Argrave was surprised the aged elf could speak so amiably.

"Who's to say?" Argrave replied vaguely.

Rowe stepped up to Argrave, walking alongside him. "You have no plans for what lies beyond Gerechtigkei?"

"I take things as they come."

"And you are not certain that what lies beyond will come," the elf followed Argrave's logic.

"I..." Argrave hesitated. "Could die," he admitted. "All I do is tackle things beyond me. If you've noticed, this body is not so fit for tackling." Argrave shook his hands about, demonstrating his wrists.

"It's good you realize this," Rowe said, uncharacteristically passive. "You should not be merely planning to deal with Gerechtigkeits. You should be planning for what happens should you perish."

At that, Argrave's breath stopped. He saw the sense in Rowe's words immediately. Though Argrave knew that his death was very well likely, he took no measures to counteract Gerechtigkeits should that actually happen. His lungs felt tight, and Argrave took a few quick breaths to gain his bearing.

"What kind of..." Argrave paused, then mustered some cheer to say, "A bit ridiculous to make plans to die, no?"

Rowe shook his head. "I thought there might be sense yet in you. How foolish of me." He looked out to the village. "I can feel that mage you spoke of. His mana is... unusual. Warped, dancing, like mist or fog. He did not become an A-rank mage by ordinary means."

"No, he didn't," Argrave agreed. "I don't know how it is in Veiden, but each A-rank mage is different than the last depending on how they advance. They attune their body to the magic they use."

"There is only one method of advancement in Veiden. The spellcaster embraces the ice magics throughout their veins. Some brazen fools discover more, at times, but such is a rare occurrence." Rowe shook his head. "Despite its bulk, his mana is less substantial than mine. I am confident should things go awry."

They grew ever closer to the village. The homes in Karrel were made of stone—a rarity amongst villages, but being in such close proximity to the hub of most magical activity for miles around definitely had its benefits. Doubtless some earth-focused elemental mage had made these villager's homes of stone in order to earn a quick bag of gold.

"Good that you're confident," Argrave nodded to Rowe, and then looked back to Galamon. "You. Chug some blood, disguise your features."

Galamon obeyed Argrave's directive. Rowe looked at him perplexedly. "What're you...?"

"Vampirism is all but indistinguishable if the vampire is fully sated," Argrave explained. "Helmuth has [Minor Truesight]—he channeled most of his mana into his eyes during his ritualistic ascendance to A-rank, and it allows him to both cast spells from them and see the truth behind some things. We have two secrets that need to be kept—my association with Erlebnis, and Galamon's vampirism. Hopefully what Galamon is doing will be enough to trick Helmuth's eyes. As for myself... well, it's hopeless." Argrave shrugged and shook his head.

"You keep strange company," Rowe shook his head.

"You're now part of that," Argrave noted.

"I am strange. Regardless of the esteem behind the title, S-rank spellcasters are outliers, and thus, strange."

Argrave considered that for a moment, eventually nodding. They walked past the first of the buildings in Karrel, and Argrave looked about, searching for the people they were to meet. Soon enough, he spotted a few men with exceptionally stocky builds wearing relatively inconspicuous clothes. Argrave could see white steel boots poking out from their robes and approached.

“Appointment with Elias,” Argrave greeted politely as though he was speaking to a receptionist at a doctor’s office.

The two knights craned their neck to look up at Argrave. “Come,” one said, leading them away. Argrave followed without complaint. Soon enough, they were led behind a building, where Elias waited with two people Argrave recognized: Baron Abraham and Helmuth. Elias sat on a stump and rose when Argrave came into view.

“It’s been a while,” Elias greeted, pulling back his hood to reveal his red hair.

“Probably not long enough, in your eyes.” Argrave returned.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 73: Purple Haze All in His Eyes

Argrave’s eyes lingered on the man wearing reddish-brown robes slightly behind Elias: Helmuth. Black hair, a widow’s peak, a dour face, and a beard trimmed to a point all lent the spellcaster an appearance of harsh sternness. His eyes were constantly in motion, twisting and beckoning like there was an abyss beyond those orbs. It had been merely another interesting thing when viewing it from the perspective of a player, but now that those eyes were real, it somewhat disturbed Argrave—both their appearance, and the knowledge of what they could do.

It was difficult to distinguish where, exactly, Helmuth was looking, but Argrave was certain he had seen *something* out of the ordinary, for Helmuth displayed considerable caution gazing upon them. Perhaps it was Rowe, magical titan that he was, or perhaps it was Argrave, possessed of the blessing of a God of Knowledge. Worst yet, it might be Galamon, the vampire.

Regardless, the spellcaster stepped up to Elias’ ear and whispered something. Elias frowned as he listened, and then eventually turned an eye back to Argrave.

Argrave did not know what, exactly, Helmuth said, but eventually Elias looked to him and said simply, “I won’t. There’s no need.”

“I strongly advise against that course, young lord,” Helmuth said insistently, slightly louder. He lowered his voice again.

Argrave turned to Galamon as Helmuth whispered to Elias, conveying to the elf he wished to know what they were saying.

“He wishes to leave,” muttered Galamon beneath his breath. “He believes you are a danger, and fears that you have an S-rank spellcaster in your retinue.”

Argrave nodded, but his question soon turned out to be a waste of time. Baron Abraham said loudly, “I also think we should leave, young lord.” He raised a hand and waved it at Argrave and his three companions. “You said this bastard stopped the Veidimen invasion—why, then, does he keep only their company?”

“Because words are stronger than swords in ending wars,” Argrave supplied smoothly, interjecting himself into things to speed the conversation up. “Things were resolved diplomatically. I was named friend to the Veidimen.”

“Hah.” Abraham shook his head. “More likely you were the puppeteer behind the invasion to begin with. Start something and end something with the same hands, fabricate glory from nothing—not unlike most in Vasquer,” Abraham said, voice low.

Argrave laughed. “Conspiracy theories, now?”

“Baron Abraham, you forget your place,” Elias said.

“Margrave Reinhardt made it clear to me my place was to advise you,” Abraham turned. “And you’re going down a foolish road even conversing with this lowlife. That is my advice to you.”

“Lowlife? You’re not worth a tenth of him, even were your flesh made of gold,” Rowe said provocatively, sparking Argrave’s panic.

“Now, let’s just—” Argrave tried to begin.

“Is that right?” The Baron placed his hand on the pommel of his sword, taking a step forward towards the four of them. “Blade or spell, he’d be dead within ten seconds if we came to blows.”

Argrave felt magic stir within the air and took an instinctive step back. Something rushed from Helmuth’s hands, winding about Abraham like a tetherball. When things settled, it was revealed to be a purple mass of air coiled around Abraham’s body. The knight struggled with it, clawing at it with his hands. Argrave recognized what had happened—Helmuth used the B-rank spell [Tempest Grip]. The spell, a wind-type elemental spell, had been tainted purple by Helmuth’s unusual magic constitution.

The enchantments on Abraham’s armor sparked wildly, keeping the magic from crushing him outright. “Be silent,” Helmuth said loudly, not quite yelling. “You know naught. You tempt wrath beyond your ken, and should you proceed, I will cast you to the dogs. I would sooner carve your headstone myself than join you in death.”

Helmuth clenched his fist, and the spell matrix shining in his hand dissipated. Abraham collapsed to one knee, his legs braced as though the knight was ready to lunge and seek revenge. He stared at Helmuth indignantly, breath quick. Argrave feared that things would continue to escalate.

After a time, Abraham stood, running a gauntleted hand through his messy blonde hair. The Baron walked a fair distance away, refusing to continue the conversation. Elias stared at the Baron, saying nothing.

“One of you has some sense, it would seem,” Rowe said. “But they say if a dog has a fault, it’s the master’s—”

“Let’s not, Rowe,” Argrave interrupted, voice tense. “I have an exercise for you—if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say it at all.”

Rowe grumbled something inaudibly, and Argrave sighed, rubbing his hand against his face. “Well, since the possibility of an amiable conversation has died on the vine, let’s get to the point, Elias.” Argrave lifted his head up, meeting Elias’ gaze.

“That suits me fine,” agreed Elias. “But first, Mateth—what happened there? News is inconsistent and vague in Parbon.”

“Mateth survived,” Argrave said seriously. “A lot of people died, all of House Monticci’s fleet was destroyed, the harbors have been entirely wiped out, and the Dukedom is essentially crippled, but... the Duke, Nikoletta, and Mina persist yet.”

“That’s...” Elias processed Argrave’s succinct explanation of a complex situation. “Then this rumor of you stopping the invasion—how did that happen? How did you repel the snow elves?”

Argrave wished to claim it was fabricated, but with three snow elves at his side and Argrave having already confessed being named friend to the Veidimen, he was not confident enough to maneuver his way out of this one. Worse yet, Rowe would probably force honesty from him.

“I resolved a misunderstanding between Veiden and House Monticci. End of story,” Argrave shrugged. “Anneliese here helped me.” He tapped her shoulder, and after a moment’s pause, she nodded. “Most of the credit goes to her. She was the bridge between the two sides.”

Rowe looked back perplexedly but said nothing, to Argrave’s relief. Elias sized Anneliese up as she stared down at him. They locked eyes for a moment, and Anneliese gave a brief nod.

“It’s good that things ended, then,” Elias concluded, turning his gaze away. “But I’ve forced a digression. What is it you wanted to speak to me about?”

“The Duke of Elbraille intends to support Vasquer,” Argrave declared plainly.

Elias frowned and lowered his head. The news was similarly disquieting in Elias’ company. Helmuth looked surprised, and he brought his hand to his beard, stroking it idly. The knights looked at each other, exchanging emotions with glance alone. Even Abraham was pulled from his sulking, and he turned back to them with some anger still present in his posture.

“And by extension, Jast, his vassal, will support Vasquer as well?” Elias questioned further, half-lost in thought.

“That is the natural order of things, yes,” Argrave nodded.

“And you know this how?”

“You spoke to him,” Argrave pointed. “Veladrien of Jast. He confirmed some things for me. Good kid.”

“Then where is he?” Abraham questioned from far away.

“Absent,” Argrave said after a pause. He had neglected to ask Stain to come along. “But I have these letters detailing exchanges between the Duke and the Count, speaking of the war to come. It contains strategy, the like. Here.” Argrave reached into his satchel, pulling out a tightly wrapped bundle of letters. Elias stepped forward and took it, breaking the string binding them.

Elias read through the letters in silence. Argrave kept his eyes on Helmuth. He could not be certain of it, for the man lacked both pupils and irises, but he was near certain the man was staring at him.

“Letters can be forged,” Abraham stated. Argrave was rather impressed the man could still be so annoyingly opposed to him even after being threatened by an A-rank mage—his own ally, no less.

“I don’t think they are,” said Elias as he read through them.

“How?” Abraham asked incredulously.

“Intuition. You should be well familiar with the Parbon instinct, Baron Abraham,” Elias reminded Abraham. He looked up at Argrave. “Besides, the information contained within these isn’t something that can be forged.”

“I’m glad you see that. Even still, I can get Veladrien if you doubt me. Would just take a snap of the fingers, more or less,” Argrave emulated the motion.

“A boy of unconfirmed identity,” Abraham said, shaking his head.

“The man’s stubborn adhesion to his own mental deficiencies is very admirable,” said Rowe sarcastically, disguising an insult with compliment.

Argrave said nothing so as not to draw more ire, but internally agreed with the comment. Abraham walked away and sat on a stump.

“So you wish to stop me from entering Jast,” Elias followed Argrave’s logic. “It could be dangerous for me there.”

“Not necessarily,” Argrave pointed to emphasize his point. “I think things would be better suited if Jast came to the aid of House Parbon, instead. Anneliese and I have been discussing how we might make that happen.”

“You’d do that—turn Jast against Vasquer? You intend to support House Parbon against your own family?” Elias tried to confirm.

“Family? I’m not a Vasquer,” Argrave shook his head. “And most bearing that name do nothing good for the world by continuing to live.”

Elias seemed taken aback by that statement. “Even still, King Felipe is your father.” Elias sighed, and then shrugged his shoulders defeatedly. “Well, I... I’m not here to teach you morals. What exactly did you have in mind? I’ll hear you out, at the very—”

“Young lord Elias,” Helmuth interrupted, grabbing Elias’ shoulder. “Let’s speak privately for a moment.”

Elias looked at the spellcaster for a moment, then nodded.

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“What is this about?” Elias inquired from within the confines of the warding spell Helmuth had created.

“You should not work with this man,” Helmuth said plainly.

“And why not?” Elias inquired neutrally.

“There is a foul blackness within him.”

“Even you opine on his morals?” Elias looked away as though disappointed. “I know him better than—”

“No,” interrupted Helmuth, uncaring of Elias’ station on account of their privacy. “I don’t speak of his morals. I speak literally. An abyss resides within his chest. As you know, I see more than most,” Helmuth pointed to his eyes.

“You do,” Elias nodded. “And there’s a... an abyss? Within Argrave?” the young lord repeated uncertainly.

“Yes. I might use more specific wording, but even looking at it is...” Helmuth dared a glance, then quickly turned his head away. “There is a hole within him. It is the touch of something ancient—older than Vasquer, perhaps even older than the soil we stand on.”

“What does that mean?” Elias leaned in. “What exactly did you see?”

“I but glanced at it, and it threatened to consume my mind,” Helmuth stated. “It is a connection to something unknown, perhaps unknowable. There are few words I can use to describe it besides... an abyss. A void. I suspect that whatever it is rests beyond the limits of my mind. Were I to guess... it must be a connection to a god.”

Elias tapped his fingers together, lost in thought. “Could Argrave be blessed by one of the gods in Vasquer’s pantheon?”

“No. Whatever resides in him is far older than any of our gods,” Helmuth shook his head. “I must reiterate, young lord—be wary of this man. Stay far away. If he belongs to one of the ancient gods, their callous disregard for life will surely be mirrored in him. We gain nothing by associating with him.”

Elias turned his head towards Argrave, gaze distant as it was lost in deliberation.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 74: Negotiations

“What are we doing here?” asked Galamon, looking around at outfits hung on simple carved mannequins. The majority of them were quite grandiose, studded with jewels of all denominations and made of the finest silk.

“Why does one generally go to a shop?” answered Argrave absently, staring at a set of clothes. “To buy, of course. And to avoid Rowe, lest he hound you about repaying that favor. Elias has placed things on hold until tomorrow, so Rowe’s duty is not yet done.” Argrave paused, then fearing Galamon’s judgement, quickly added, “We’ll do it in time, of course, but not now.”

“Here, one can only buy frivolities,” stated Galamon judgmentally.

Argrave touched a piece of clothing, testing its texture. “Pageantry is important if one is to be participating in a pageant. It’s in the name, after all. A banquet of nobles is similar enough to a pageant—all lights and colors, only serving to mask the reality of the people behind them.”

Galamon frowned, and Anneliese beside him explained, “Argrave intends to attend the banquet alongside Elias in order to persuade Count Delbraun to support the rebellion.”

“The boy was undecided, yet you’re already planning for what happens if he agrees? He said he needed a day to think. Not a good portent,” Galamon argued.

Argrave stopped at a suit with poofy parts on the arms and legs, musing, “People actually think this looks good...?” He looked back to Galamon. “Elias will agree.”

“Predicated on what?”

"I think he is somewhat positively predisposed towards me, and Anneliese agrees with that assessment. He's a bold person, and he likes his family quite a bit. He's also smart enough to realize how disastrous the Duchy of Elbraille supporting Vasquer would be. Jast is the main pillar of Elbraille's power—if it wavers, Elbraille will likely follow suit."

Galamon considered this, then asked, "Why? If Jast swears fealty to Elbraille, the Duchy should be much more powerful than it."

"I'd place the two at around equal strength," Argrave shook his head. "Once upon a time, Elbraille was much more powerful than Jast, but this place has been growing in strength decade by decade on account of shrewd management and a focus on magic." Argrave pointed at Galamon. "The point to remember, though: Elbraille would be flanked by both the territories of Parbon and Jast if this city of magic pledged support to the rebellion. The Duke is a coward and would never risk this."

"But what of Jast's honor? They swore fealty to Elbraille. Does this mean nothing?"

Argrave laughed. "No. Such a thing might matter in that winter wonderland you call home, but you're far from Veiden. Honor and loyalty are the words that noble houses preach, but beneath it, the true light shines through: appearances. As long as they appear honorable, nothing else matters. Elbraille has not yet gone public with their support of Vasquer. Provided this goes through, they never will."

Argrave stopped at a neat black outfit with a long yet thin coat. The collar and lapel had been fitted with a resplendent gold fur, and Argrave ran his hand against it. "Huh. Soft." The cuffs were studded with small rubies, and flourishes of gold thread decorated the outfit tastefully.

"They're Vasquer colors, but... well, it's hardly their fault these colors work so well together." Argrave looked back to Galamon and Anneliese. "I think I've found what I'll wear."

"It will look nice," commented Anneliese.

"I should hope so," said Argrave. "Would you like something while we're here? A lovely dress, perhaps? It's only fair. Most of this business regarding Elias was your idea, anyway. I just supplied the knowledge—you came up with the plan," he gestured towards Anneliese.

"We agreed I should not attend," Anneliese shook her head. "The presence of Veidimen at the banquet would only be a detriment to your ability to persuade those present."

"No personal interest?" Argrave inquired.

"No," she laughed.

"Shame," Argrave shrugged. "You'd look fantastic in something like this," Argrave walked up to a slender white dress on display decorated with lines of gold and silver running along its length. Foremost on its decorations were myriad ambers, each shining against the light.

"Well, no matter. I should find the tailor, get my measurements done..." Argrave walked away.

Anneliese stared at the dress for some time after Argrave had left, head tilted as she examined it. Her brows furrowed in thought, but then she smiled faintly. She turned her head back at Argrave who'd walked some distance away and hastened to catch up.

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A day passed, and Argrave met with Elias once more as was agreed. They met at the same spot—Karrel. It was early morning. Rowe was present again—they had only managed to get him to come once more because Galamon promised to answer his question immediately after this meeting. As if in protest, the aged elf was considerably less engaged this time, sitting on a stump off in the distance.

“After considerable deliberation, I’ve decided to hear you out. After that, I’ll decide. I can’t make a judgement without the full picture,” said Elias.

“Okay,” said Argrave tiredly. He had spent the entire night trying to learn the [Electric Eel] spell, but it was considerably more archaic and complex than the vast majority of the spells in the Order of the Gray Owl. He had very nearly grasped it, but it would still take some time. Another sleepless night, perhaps.

“Well,” Argrave rubbed his eyes, “It’s very simple. You have to get married, Elias.”

Elias stared at Argrave blankly, and Helmuth frowned off to the side. Abraham threw up his hands and walked away.

“Don’t worry,” Argrave shook his head. “You won’t be marrying me, Elias. I don’t think such an arrangement is legal in Vasquer, and it also would be entirely useless. I don’t think we’re fated, either. Sorry.”

“What are you...?” Elias began dryly, Argrave’s sarcasm sparking only confusion. “Forget it. Who would I marry?”

“Lydia of Jast, Count Delbraun’s sister,” Argrave said clearly.

“You mean Ridia,” said Elias.

“Was it Ridia?” Argrave frowned. “Quite a gaffe. A forgivable one, I hope. Indeed, in some languages, R and L are the same thing... well, never mind,” Argrave shook his head to dispel errant thoughts. “Yes, you’ll be marrying Ridia of Jast.”

“She is five years Elias’ senior,” Helmuth interrupted. “Hardly a suitable bride for the heir to House Parbon.”

“Twenty five?” Argrave questioned, which Helmuth nodded to. “It’s a reasonable gap, I believe.”

“Even if the young lord agreed, one of Count Delbraun’s daughters would be more fitting. The oldest is nubile.”

“Isn’t she thirteen?” Argrave said, grimacing after hearing the word ‘nubile.’ “I know they say ‘if their age is off the clock, they’re ready for the...’ I’m not going to finish that,” Argrave admonished himself. “To your point: the age gap is bigger there. Seven years. And I think that would be a rather... sickening choice, personally speaking.”

“The choice is unimportant,” Elias interrupted. “Some facts stand in our way. My father is not here—he is the patriarch of House Parbon, and he decides these things.”

"I didn't say you'd be swearing your vows on the morrow," Argrave shook his head. "Get a betrothal, then get your father's permission. I'm sure he'll agree, given the circumstances. This is the best course for your house's future. You'll get a steadfast ally in Jast, and Elbraille will likely come around the exact same way.

Elias turned around, hand to his chin as he thought on the matter. Helmuth contributed, saying, "Elbraille supporting House Parbon should this union happen is a... reasonable outcome, young lord," he advised.

"And doubtless Jast would lend Vasquer considerable support. Father sent me here to obtain aid from any mages—a union with Jast would facilitate that," Elias reasoned. "They have a closer relationship with the Order than any other noble house."

"Politically speaking, it is a shrewd move," Helmuth nodded.

"But practically speaking," Elias followed, turning on his heel to face Argrave. "How do you plan to achieve this? That friend of yours, Veladrien of Jast? Does he have the count's ear?"

"He's a card, but he's not the full hand," Argrave shook his head. "That banquet you were invited to—we should attend. From there, I'm confident in persuading the Count."

"We could be walking into a cage," Helmuth shook his head.

"Come with him, then," Argrave pointed at Helmuth. "You're competent enough, Helmuth, I know that much. The Count has no S-rank mages in his service, and perhaps two A-rank spellcasters, both of whom are High Wizards in the Order of the Gray Owl. Need I remind you that the Order is a politically neutral entity? They won't act."

"It's still dangerous," Helmuth retorted, taking a step back.

"So mind your step, watch what you eat," Argrave advised. "Nothing risked, nothing gained."

Helmuth pondered this, and Elias clearly waited to hear his thoughts on the matter. The silence stretched out, and Argrave turned to look at Anneliese, about to question her opinion on the situation.

"This is ridiculous!" a shout broke the silence, and Argrave whipped his head to its source. Baron Abraham stepped forward. "All this plausible nonsense is just to get our foot in the door. This bastard's lathered honey on a poisoned blade. Why are we here?" he stretched his arms out in exasperation.

"If Argrave wanted you dead, I'd know. It'd be easy, like crushing a grape," Rowe said happily, emulating the motion with his finger and thumb.

"Baron Abraham," Elias said loudly. "You were warned time and time again. You came as an advisor, not as a commander. I will give you two choices: leave, return to Parbon, whereupon I will return later and report your repeated disobedience to my father." Elias stared down Abraham, then added the second choice. "Your only other option is to remain quiet."

"I'll speak the truth unto death," Abraham said. He stepped forward, gaze flitting between Helmuth and Elias. "You shan't muzzle me. I'll return to Parbon and tell your father what's occurring here myself, young lord Elias," the Baron veritably snarled.

He walked away from the group, stomping with every step. Rowe watched him go, a smile on his face.

"I apologize for his behavior," Elias said sincerely. "He is a man well used to being on the battlefield—giving orders, never receiving them. A terror, my father calls him, but an untrained one. It is as your old friend over there said—if a dog goes bad, it is the fault of the master. I should have handled him better."

"Humility. I did not think humans could possess it," Rowe said glibly. "Well, some dogs are born stupid, too. You must take this into account."

"He is hot of temper, but not stupid," Elias disagreed. "Argrave... we've had our disagreements."

"So we have," Argrave nodded. "Most of which were my fault, admittedly," he found the words easy to speak—it was like admitting someone else was at fault.

"Still, I think that this would be the best course of action," Elias nodded, stepping forward. "This banquet—I'll attend. Where should I go to find you?"

"The Knight's Pawn," Argrave said. "I'll be bringing some friends. They'll help facilitate things."

"Then I shall meet you there," Elias held out a hand.

Argrave shook his hand. "I'm glad this went well, despite the boisterous one."

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 75: Castellan of the Empty

"Now that is done," Rowe said, stepping in front of Argrave and his party. "I won't be denied my answer any longer, Galamon. Do you intend to break your word? Has your time in this place of twisted morals sullied the honor I know you once had?"

"I'll answer," Galamon refuted, shaking his head. "Ask."

"Then let us go somewhere private," Rowe waved.

"No," Galamon stopped Rowe. "Ask here. These two would never cease pestering me if you ask elsewhere."

"Galamon 'the Great,' brought to heel by children not a quarter his age," Rowe mused. "Fine. It's your business, anyway. I'll give our audience context, then." Rowe tapped his staff against the ground and a white magic ward spread out, enveloping the four of them.

"That day they found you having succumbed to vampirism, your brother's head was crushed," Rowe began. "Most believe you killed your brother Berran in feral rage after he turned you into a vampire. You always refused to answer. How did your brother die?"

Despite the ceremony behind the question, Galamon did not seem deeply rattled as he answered, "When I awoke, Berran apologized for what he had done and killed himself. He used a wedge to lift a boulder, placed his head beneath it, and then allowed it to fall. His death was instant."

"Then it's as I thought," Rowe said. "Your brother was coerced into turning you."

"His children were at risk. I do not blame him," Galamon shook his head. "And it matters little. Those responsible are dead. Dras promised me he would uproot them before he sent me away, and I know he kept that promise."

"Who was responsible?" questioned Anneliese, a query which made Argrave nod in solidarity.

"The Ebon Cult," said Galamon, his guttural voice carrying a pure hatred that made Argrave shudder.

"Aye. They were before your time, girl. Dras slaughtered them like the dogs they were," Rowe lowered his head. "They were once the Ebon tribe. They discovered Ebonice. Some people abhor using the stuff for that reason."

Argrave stepped forward, then turned to face Galamon. "The Ebon Cult existed in Veiden?"

Galamon's pupils fell on Argrave, their whiteness seeming especially cold today. "What do you mean, 'existed in?'" he questioned.

"It could be a cult of the same name—darkness, blackness, and other such stygian descriptors are trendy in cult circles, I hear—but the Ebon Cult is alive and well in Berendar, living deep in the crust of the world."

Galamon grabbed Argrave's shoulders, which dredged up some unpleasant memories and made Argrave freeze. "Describe them," he said insistently, pulling Argrave closer.

Anneliese put her hand on Galamon's wrist. "Let go, first," she said.

Galamon took a deep breath and then released Argrave. "Forgive me. I need to hear their descriptions."

"Well..." Argrave rolled his shoulders, still feeling a soreness where Galamon had grasped. "They're a multiracial group, which is perhaps their most inclusive trait. They dwell in the old dwarven cities, whose creators have long ago migrated deeper into the earth. They use necromancy, shamanic magic, and blood magic, all of which they are masters at. In truth, they are more a nation than a cult—a religious state beneath the earth."

"What are their ideals—what do they worship?" Galamon said impatiently.

"A false god," Argrave shook his head. "They're trying to turn that falsehood into reality—not that that's even possible. His name is Mozzahr, the Castellan of the Empty. I'd say he's a spellcaster at Rowe's level."

"A bold claim," snorted Rowe.

"You're right. Mozzahr is probably stronger," Argrave nodded. "Shamanic magic is a pain, after all."

Rowe raised a bushy brow, gritting his teeth. Galamon turned his head away, silent. When the awkward silence stretched out, Argrave followed up, asking, "What? Does that name mean anything to you?"

"It's unfamiliar," Galamon said musingly. "Rowe?"

"Sounds like nonsense to me. Castellan of the Empty? What does that mean? Did he go to an open field and declare himself its governor?" The S-rank spellcaster shook his head. "I did not review what was taken during the razing of the Ebon tribe. Patriarch Dras might know better. I can inquire."

“Castellan of the Empty could mean a lot of things. ‘Empty’ meaning ‘empty people,’ or meaning ‘void.’ Hard to govern either, I’d suspect. We can ask him when the time comes, if indeed he’s amenable to conversation at that time.”

“Ask him? What does that mean?” Galamon demanded.

“He has to die, eventually. He’ll cause problems in the future,” Argrave declared. “This cult rivals Vasquer in power. They’ve done us a favor by going to the dwarven cities, deep underground, but we still have to bury them. We have to make sure they never come out of their holes.” Argrave shrugged, then added, “In time, of course. We have other priorities.”

“Do you have a plan for every step until Gerechtigkeits manifests?” Rowe asked curiously.

“I do,” Argrave nodded. “I have a very, very busy schedule, which scarcely offers time even to sleep. I’ve divided it into phases, recently. First, I solidify my power and deal with immediate problems—like Vasquer, for instance. We’re on that phase,” Argrave pointed to the ground. “Second, I gain support and alliances. It’d be impossible to persuade the human world of Gerechtigkeits’ existence presently, especially with an all-consuming civil war occurring. We’ll have to wait for Gerechtigkeits to make itself known—and believe me, it will.”

“And the third?” queried Rowe.

“I am become Death, the destroyer of the destroyer of worlds.” Argrave held his hands out in faux grandiosity. “We end Gerechtigkeits. This won’t be a battle. It’ll be a war.”

Rowe gripped his staff tightly. “You have the odd and decidedly dangerous habit of rousing my blood, Argrave,” he said. It was the first time the old elf had said his name, Argrave was sure. “Most times in anger, and now, in... vigor, I suppose.”

Argrave laughed. “Let’s hope it persists for three more years. You’ll need it then, not now.”

“I am aware, boy,” the elf reprimanded. “Now, all this talk has reminded me of the duty that the Patriarch has given to me. We’ve tended to your needs, and after hearing your little speech, I can concur it was worth my time. That said, my task strengthens Veiden, and your aid is long overdue.”

“Then I suppose I am at your disposal, provided this won’t take too long,” Argrave nodded.

“That depends on your capabilities,” Rowe said, dispelling the ward around them as effortlessly as he had created it.

#####

“Do you bring a library everywhere you go?” questioned Rowe as he stepped into their dormitory.

“Books here, books there, books on the bed, books on the chair,” he rhymed. “I shouldn’t be surprised. You seem the type that would like to own books for the sole purpose of decoration.”

“Books do look nice, but I’ll learn all of these eventually,” Argrave picked up a spellbook and waited for the rest of his party to enter before shutting the door. “It’ll merely take some time.”

“Mmm... if your willpower doesn’t fail first, your memory will,” Rowe disagreed. He moved some books off a chair and sat down, letting out a huff of air. He leaned his staff against the table.

"I'm not an old man at the cusp of losing his mind. My memory is good," Argrave countered. "So, things have been settled with Elias thanks to your help. What could the unfathomably powerful S-rank mage want with the weak and altogether not-helpful me?" Argrave sat down adjacent to Rowe. "Frankly, I can't believe you're here. Don't you have important functions in Veiden?"

"Yes, but I hate doing them," Rowe said blatantly. His gaze wandered to Anneliese and Galamon, who took their seats at the table. "Patriarch Dras chose me specifically for two reasons—of everyone in Veiden, I've come to understand enchantments the best." Rowe held up one finger. "And two: he wishes to pass some... untraditional reforms, shall we say, and doesn't want my meddling."

"Despite knowing that, you're here?" Argrave asked curiously.

"I get tired of making sure people don't hurt themselves," Rowe shook his head. Seeing Argrave's incredulous expression, he added, "You try holding the line against the younger generations for hundreds and hundreds of years. There's only one me, but they keep making more damned babies. Hard to see the value in life when you realize it's a renewable resource."

"Time was I had some ideological allies in Veiden, but I've outlived all of them." Rowe shook his head, and then waved his hand as though shooing something. "Besides, Dras is reasonably intelligent. He won't ruin things too much, and I can fix what he does when I return."

"I see." Argrave didn't think too deeply into the matter—now that Veiden had ceased its progress into the mainland, his business with them would be done for a time. "You mentioned enchantments earlier. Is that related to your business here?"

"Aye." Rowe tapped his finger against the table. "Our attack on that city... Mateth, was it? It was illuminating."

"Did you have a moment of epiphany where you realized the foolishness of war?" Argrave asked drolly. "That would be the best outcome. Embrace pacifism, live peacefully."

"No. What we realized was the foolishness of the way we warred," Rowe shook his head. "Some mages tried attacking the enchanted walls with magic, you know." Rowe gestured to Argrave, then continued bitterly, "The spells rebounded, exploding in the ranks of our own men. Dozens dead, so I'm told."

"Yeah. House Monticci is—well, was—strong," Argrave amended. "Their walls have never fallen, and their navy had never been beaten before. Some say their sigil should have been a golden turtle. But Veiden annihilated their navy; at that, at least, you can take pride. Your extremely poorly timed invasion was well done."

"What does it matter whether their navy had been beaten before? To Veiden, they're all the same—enemies to be conquered in time."

"All the same? With that approach, Veiden's bound to fail. There's a reason I killed your druids, Rowe. Intelligence is paramount." Argrave placed his elbows on the table. "Know thy self, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories. Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win," he spoke, acting up the part of the sagely scholar for his own amusement.

"I don't care to hear your platitudes," Rowe shook his head. "And knowing our enemy is precisely the reason why I am here."

"Will you keep speaking vagaries or get to the point?" Galamon placed his arm on the table.

"Hmph. Impatient as ever," Rowe glared at Galamon.

"No. You like to speak too much. I know that well."

"Those whose words are worth hearing should make them heard," Rowe responded to Galamon, then turned his gaze back to Argrave. "Putting it plainly, we need to correct our insufficiencies in comparison to humanity."

"Alright," Argrave nodded. "You've still yet to tell me what to do."

"Can't you extrapolate things? Must I spell everything out?" Rowe shook his head. "I wish to know of enchanted architecture of note. I intend to visit and examine it. Furthermore, I must more closely examine illusion magic and enchantments. You taught Veiden how to create low-level enchantments, but none of those are capable of what was achieved at Mateth." Rowe leaned in. "It is not enough. Veiden must be strengthened. This serves your interests, too—we will aid you against Gerechtigheit."

"Then perhaps you should have been nicer to Elaine," Argrave said, a faintly amused smile forming his face. "I can't be your tour guide, nor can I give you all the secrets you need. She can, though."

"I did not expect one so weak to hold a powerful position. But she won't help now, no question," Rowe followed. "Hmm..."

"No, she'll have a question, I'm sure," Argrave disagreed. "The question will be... how much can you pay for her help?"

"Dras has given me the liberties of using Veiden's coffers, if need be," Rowe stated as though it was the natural course of things.

"Then your answer to that question should be 'a hell of a lot,'" Argrave smiled. "If you're nice, I'll try and mark down the price. I think I can civilize you yet. Fortunately, I intended to meet with her shortly. She'll be coming with to the banquet, and I need to invite her." Argrave stood up from his chair. "If you'd like, you may come along now. Two birds, one stone."