

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 20: Royal Road to Misery (2)

A black carriage travelled down the road, the light from the setting suns reflecting off its lavish gold decorations and brilliantly illuminating the road. Induen lazily slumped on the carriage's window, staring at the great capital Dirracha far ahead.

Dirracha was called the City of Dragons. Detractors called it the City of Snakes, in reference to the Vasquer's heraldry. The banners of the royal family hung from the walls; a great golden serpent coiled around a sword on a black field. Induen smiled, watching them sway in the winds.

Dirracha was built into the side of a mountain, ascending towards the peak until it rose to the Dragon Palace. One could see every level of the city, as the walls were not especially high. It was cordoned off into distinct sectors, divided by high walls and the long road down the center leading directly to the palace: the Royal Road. There were other entrances to the city. The Royal Road, though, could only be travelled by those of Vasquer blood. It was not strictly enforced, but the gate only opened for royalty.

The gargantuan gold gates of the Royal Road parted as Induen approached with his carriage. Induen pulled his head back inside the carriage and lowered the black curtains. Two of the royal guards sat with him in the carriage, vigilant as ever. Outside, a great number of them guarded the carriage, golden armor matched with similarly decorated horses. It was a procession worthy of the heir to the throne.

Induen's carriage passed beneath the gate. Far ahead, where the Royal Road exited Dirracha and entered the Dragon Palace, a great host blocked the path. They held a white banner bearing a golden lion. Margrave Reinhardt stood at the head of the group, blocking all entry to the palace.

One of the royal knights knocked on the side of Induen's carriage and poked his head in. "Prince Induen. Margrave Reinhardt is blocking the Royal Road with his knights."

"What?" Induen said in exasperation. He did not bother to look. "Keep moving. If they refuse to move, refuse to stop."

Being on the Royal Road was not illegal—the common people had to pass over it to reach other portions of the city very frequently. Blocking a royal's passage was, though, and Induen did not assume the Margrave would have the gall to do so.

Their carriage continued onwards, many of the royal knights moving to the front of the carriage in case they needed to move House Parbon's knights from the road. Dirracha was far quieter than it usually was when a royal returned, and the tension grew as the carriage rattled up the road.

Slowly, the Margrave Reinhardt turned his back to see the coming carriage. He walked past the sea of white-gold banners, walking towards the carriage until he stood directly in front of it.

Another knock came, and the royal guard spoke again. "The Margrave's knights refuse to stand aside, Prince."

"Pfft." Induen scoffed. "As I said, just continue onwards. Should they still stand in the way, push them aside." He scratched at his chin. The knight nodded his head and pulled away from the carriage.

"Yes, my prince," the knight said hastily. Induen heard the order being relayed outside and smiled from within the carriage. He raised the curtains a little, watching the spectacle outside.

The carriage continued up the pavement, pulled steadily by horses. As they neared House Parbon, the royal knights spread out, pushing past them with their horses. The knights of House Parbon were pushed about ungracefully, but a path refused to open.

Despite the blatant provocation, the knights of House Parbon remained firm. Reinhardt stared coldly, anger rising on his face, but he did not order his men to act. He had instructed them long in advance to bear with whatever shame the royal family hoisted upon them.

A crowd was beginning to form near the Royal Road. A great horde of people gathered around, most of them workers and common laborers. They watched the scene, craning over each other to see. As the crowd grew larger, the knights on both sides grew uneasy.

In a crowd, emotions become infectious. Though at first, calm prevailed as people watched the spectacle, one bold man let out a boo, and others were emboldened. Their expressions of disapproval echoed out, and the name of Margrave Reinhardt, a war hero, echoed throughout the city.

Induen pulled back the curtain, a grim expression on his face now that he was being jeered as so. The two knights from across him watched him uneasily, fearing his temper, but he sat quietly. Something thumped against the carriage. Induen peeked his head out, only for something to whirl past his head and strike the inner coach.

"These damned...!" Induen fumed. He shut the curtains once more.

With the confrontation between Parbon's knights and the royal guard occupying the bulk of both groups' attention, the people were able to walk out into the street. At first, they only broke into the road to throw food or wood planks. Gradually, though, their harassment evolved.

One laborer came to close to the carriage, and the two royal knights sitting with Induen decided to get out and deal with him. They kicked the man in the knee, casting him to the ground. They grabbed his burlap shirt and threw him away, sending him rolling. At this, the jeers turned hostile, and the crowd was incensed.

The mob closed in from both ends, pushing at the royal knights from atop their horses. The royal guard tried to remain calm, but there was a deep wrath brewing in the hearts of the people, and they were not deterred as they pushed past the gold-armored guards. They were a great tide of people, and they descended on the knights like a locust plague.

A horse, startled, bucked and tried heartily to throw off the knight on its back. It kicked one of the people mobbing by, casting him to the stone with a split head. Few saw what truly happened, and soon enough, hostile shoves evolved into a full-fledged attack. People tried to pull the royal knights from their horses, tear off their armor, and beat them. Few succeeded.

The people gathered around Induen's carriage, their palms slamming against its surface. Induen grabbed near the sides, trying to stay balanced as it rocked. The horses attached to the carriage tried to bolt, digging into the crowd, and the carriage driver was pulled from the top and beaten. Many royal knights drew their swords when they saw their master's carriage being assaulted.

When the first cut whizzed through the air, all of the guard's discipline was lost. The royal knights shore through the crowd with reckless abandon, trying to be certain the prince would not be harmed. The crowd tried to disperse, but others behind them that did not know what was occurring prevented their withdrawal.

The Margrave Reinhardt watched this, hand clenched tight on his banner. His breathing was quick and labored, deliberating what to do intensely. He saw a royal knight step atop a young man and jam a shield into his neck, severing his head. With that, the decision was made for him.

"Knights of Parbon! Protect the people!"

Pandemonium ensued. The line of House Parbon's knights, angered with righteous fury, descended on the royal knights like a locust plague. Induen opened the carriage door

and stepped outside, a smile on his face. He held his hand up and conjured a battle-axe from thin air that shone with magic.

Induen laughed heartily. "Just this much, and he loses it?"

Induen jumped into the fray and tore through the knights of House Parbon with reckless abandon. He blocked one knight's blow with the haft of his axe, then kicked the knight away before jamming the weapon's spike in his eye. He threw the axe and it soared above the head of a royal knight to bisect one of the knights of Parbon. He conjured another, preparing to meet his next foe.

Out of the corner of his eye, Margrave Reinhardt jumped above one of the knights, the banner of House Parbon still held tight in his hands. He used it as a spear, jabbing it towards Induen. The prince blocked it with the blade of the conjured axe, staggering a few steps backward.

"So, the old war-general finally lost his cool," Induen taunted, barely audible above the din. "Do you know what this means?"

"For you, or for me?" The Margrave yelled back coldly.

Induen held his hand out, sending a blade of wind hurtling forth. The Margrave ducked it, tossing aside the banner and grabbing a blade from a fallen royal knight. He kicked a helmet that had been dropped on the ground towards Induen.

Induen swatted the helmet aside, and the Margrave surged forth like a crimson grizzly bear. The royal knights all broke free from their fight, rushing to intercept the Margrave. Induen, undaunted, stepped forward to meet the Margrave. The crowds broke away, screaming in fear as those they loved died around them.

Reinhardt's scavenged blade fell upon the prince's battle-axe. The magical weapon shattered instantly, and the prince stepped back to dodge the tip of the blade. The Margrave stepped forward as though this was expected, delivering a quick punch to the prince's face. The prince jolted back, clutching his nose in surprise. A royal knight moved to intercept the Margrave.

Induen held his hand out, conjuring a complex spell matrix. A prism of ice formed, rotating fiercely and firing spikes intermittently at the Margrave. Reinhardt took a step back, dodging a blow from the royal knight. He seized his attacker by the arm and held him in front of him, and the ice spikes met the royal knight's golden armor. It was well-enchanted to ward against magic, but the royal knight still coughed blood from the force of the impact.

The tide of battle surged towards the Margrave and the prince, both knights vying to protect their master. The Margrave held the royal knight tightly, pushing forth against the still-firing ice spikes. Prince Induen started to conjure another battle-axe, but the Margrave threw the blade he held. Induen fell on his back to dodge it.

Reinhardt cast aside the royal knight he held, breaking free from the crowd of gold-armored royal knights. His ruby eyes shone with the ferocity of a wild animal as he rushed at Induen. The crown prince summoned a barrier, and the Margrave grabbed into his boot to retrieve a gleaming white knife. He stabbed the barrier, and sparks flew briefly before it shattered.

Induen, flat on his back, raised his foot and kicked aside the Margrave's dagger. It flew away, jamming into the wall of a nearby building. The Margrave stepped and stomped at his face, but Induen blocked it with his arm.

Induen prepared to grab Reinhardt's foot the next time it came down at him, but to his surprise, the Margrave walked past him. He stood atop the carriage wheel of Induen's vehicle, cupped his hands to his mouth, and shouted, "Retreat! Return to Parbon! Prepare for war!"

His last sentence, 'prepare for war,' seemed to echo throughout all of Dirracha. Induen came to his feet, ready to fight the Margrave more, but a tide of golden-armored royal knights surged in front of him, shields at the ready. The Margrave led his troops down the Royal Road, and the royal knights remained protecting their master. The knights of House Parbon proceeded unimpeded, the forces at Dirracha inadequate to prevent their escape.

Induen caressed his tender arm. "Suppose he's not a famous general for nothing."

The crown prince moved to the wall where the white knife stuck into the wall. He pulled it out, placing his finger against the tip as he tested it. The royal knights gathered around, waiting for Induen's command. Induen watched as the Margrave's men pushed past the city guard.

"Hear me, people of Vasquer!" Induen shouted as the people ran from the scene of carnage, tripping over bodies in their haste to flee. "House Parbon have declared themselves enemies of Vasquer, and henceforth Reinhardt is a traitor of the realm!"