

## Jackal 166

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### Chapter 166: Tension Before a Plunge

Argrave stared at the Margrave beside his wyvern. Reinhardt did not advance or retreat, merely stared at them with an indiscernible expression, one hand on the pommel of the sword at his belt, and the other on the horn of his wyvern.

"Couldn't have spotted him, Galamon?" Argrave whispered to his companion.

"There was a wall," Galamon noted. "And you gave no time to scout. Not even with that bird."

Argrave ground his hands together. "I know. I just want to complain."

"That's the patriarch of House Parbon?" Durran asked, some excitement on his tone.

"He is remaining by his wyvern in case he needs to retreat, I suspect," Anneliese noted, ignoring Durran's query.

"Alright, alright," Argrave finally turned. "Nobody do a damn thing. Just stay still." After giving that command, Argrave let out some curses. "Alright. God damn it all."

Argrave took a step ahead, and breathed deeply, trying his best to appear confident. "The three of you will wait here. I'll go alone, resolve things. I'm sure he won't be spooked by that."

"That is dangerous," Anneliese protested.

"I'll be fine. I got away from him once before unscathed, and I can do it again if need be." Argrave walked away.

"Argrave..." Anneliese called out once again, and he heard her step forward.

Argrave turned and held both his hands out, palms facing her. "I'll be fine."

She stared, and then nodded. "Be careful," she cautioned, not entirely satisfied by his assurance.

With a wink, he turned back to the Margrave and his wyvern. Though he walked confidently and kept his expression firm, his Brumesingers writhed within his clothing, mirroring his own anxiety. He kept his hands in plain sight, and far away from any pockets within his gray leather duster. Though the Margrave did not lower his hand from the sword at his belt, he did not flee or brace himself.

Argrave came to stand across from Margrave Reinhardt. He kept a fairly large distance between them, but he was close enough to hear the wyvern's breathing. The Margrave glared up at him with his ruby eyes, expression inscrutable.

"Hi," Argrave repeated his earlier greeting.

"Argrave," Reinhardt finally said. "Barely recognized you."

Argrave brushed one hand through his hair. Certainly, he was tanner, his hair was longer, and his eyes were much, much different. "Hopefully the change is positive."

“What is this?” the Margrave questioned with a growl. “An ambush? A secret meeting? Intimidation?”

“Nothing like that,” Argrave quickly shook his head, and then rubbed his cheek with one hand. “If you want me to be honest... we thought you wouldn’t be here.”

Reinhardt clenched his wyvern’s horns tighter, showing possessiveness. “You thought to take from me once again, did you?”

“Forget that. If I wanted a wyvern so desperately, my friend back there could provide,” Argrave pointed back. “He’s from one of the southern tribes. Son of a chieftain, actually. And yes, you’re not mishearing things,” Argrave continued, falling into his practiced suave rhythm. “He’s from the southern tribes. Meaning I’ve been in the Burnt Desert these past... well, it’s been a while. Two months, maybe more.”

The Margrave frowned, but Argrave pressed on. “There was something I very desperately needed in the Burnt Desert. You can see it right now—don’t touch, though,” Argrave cautioned, pointing to his eyes. It wasn’t the full truth, but it was the easiest example to use in this conversation. “I came to get these eyes, among other things. It’s a very long story, and I won’t bore you with it. But!” Argrave raised a finger. “I had to get back to Vasquer. And passing through that big gate beneath the Lionsun Wall—something tells me that would never, ever happen. So, I just wanted to sneak through here. I am sorry about the wall, though,” Argrave clasped his hands together and looked back. “A tragic necessity. I can pay you back,” he added positively.

The Margrave didn’t seem swayed by Argrave’s assurances. He digested Argrave’s words in silence, ruby eyes retaining their cold glare. Eventually, his head shifted in revelation, and he questioned, “How did you get to the Burnt Desert in the first place?”

“I passed beneath the earth. I travelled the Low Way of the Rose,” Argrave answered quickly, anticipating the question. He let his answer hang in the air, even though he already knew what he was going to say next.

The Margrave furrowed his brows, glancing Argrave up and down. The second he opened his mouth to say more, Argrave cut in, “If you’d like, you can confirm with the Stonepetal Sentinels that I travelled through there a little while ago. While we didn’t part on the best of terms, I’m certain you can at least confirm I passed through there.”

The Margrave scanned Argrave’s face, perhaps trying to discern if he was honest.

“Would take two days at best to send someone to and from the entrance to the Low Way of the Rose,” Argrave continued. “While I wouldn’t care for it, if it can abate your worries about me, I can stay here.”

*And gather information,* Argrave left those words unspoken. As far as he knew, Stain was here, and he was certain the man would be abreast of most happenings throughout Vasquer. He could learn news of the plague, of Princess Elenore, and of any other unusual happenings that might affect the way in which things played out.

Argrave had learned from repeated personal experience that things would probably be far removed from what he knew usually happened. He needed to find out how much things had deviated and adjust his plans accordingly, per Anneliese’s advice. And she was right. Slowing down to do things deliberately

would always be better, even if it wasn't optimal. Though he'd planned to gather information at Jast, Parbon could fill that role splendidly.

"Even if you were at the Low Way, that doesn't mean what you've explained here is true," Reinhardt refuted.

Argrave held his hands out. "I helped Elias, didn't I? I secured that betrothal with Jast, helped your whole house. Is that worth nothing?"

"And my daughter. Did you help her, too?" the Margrave said, dead-eyed stare returning.

Argrave's face fell. That wasn't the sort of thing he had a response ready for. A father who loved his children would never forget that someone had crippled her.

"I am... sorry, you know," Argrave said quietly, keeping his gaze locked with Reinhardt's.

He heard the Margrave's gauntlets creak as he clenched the pommel of the sword on his belt tighter. "You always maintained it was an accident."

Argrave felt a strange sense of déjà vu as he answered, "That doesn't change the fact that it was my fault. I cannot change what I've done. All I have is my words. So, I reiterate—I apologize." He lowered his head in a bow, but kept his eyes locked with Reinhardt's. "And if your daughter is willing to accept it, I would extend my apology to her, personally. But if she cannot bear the sight of me, I will respect that."

Margrave Reinhardt held Argrave's gaze, pupils trembling. His grip tightened on his sword's pommel further, and then relaxed. He raised the hand to his forehead and caressed it.

"I come here to dispel my headache, think clearer. Yet even here, you..." he took his hand off his forehead and clenched it into a fist. "You have done right by my house, and I wronged you in the past by... unjustly seizing you. Your companions. They will be staying with you?"

Argrave brightened. "Yes, they will," he confirmed happily.

"I will not make the same mistakes as last time, however. You, and all of yours, will be heavily guarded and watched." Reinhardt's gaze wandered to his companions. "...and that tunnel. How...?"

Argrave nodded without protest. "Thank you for giving me a chance, Margrave Reinhardt. I'm eager to talk to Stain and Elias once more."

The Margrave studied his face when he mentioned Stain and Elias. Argrave was perplexed for a moment before the Margrave said bitterly, "My son isn't here. Nor is Veladrien... or as you call him, Stain. But I've been in contact with him through Helmuth. Things..." the Margrave trailed off.

Argrave raised a brow curiously.

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Though Argrave had only spoken to the Margrave for fifteen minutes or so before he and his companions were taken away to where they would be residing, what he learned was harrowing. The plague, which Argrave had been certain would remain in the northwest, was ravaging the south at an alarming rate. Elias and Stain were locked in in a siege caused by a revolt at Elbraille, where the plague

ran especially rampant. The Margrave seemed to have more information to divulge, but they were led to their rooms to rest before more could be asked.

"Things keep getting further and further out of place, Anneliese..." he whispered, sitting beside Anneliese as she rested in bed. He hunched over his knees, staring at the floor.

"We thought they might," she pointed out as she stared up at the ceiling.

"A lot of my confidence..." Argrave lifted up his head and looked at her. "...comes from knowing what's going to happen."

Anneliese poked his ribs, and he flinched in surprise. "Does it? I am skeptical."

"Well, it's—" Argrave paused. "Forget about that. Are you alright?"

"I am fine," she shook her head at once.

"Come on," he insisted. "There has to be something bothering you."

"Why must something bother me?" she questioned.

"Doesn't feel right, constantly talking about my doubts, my problems," Argrave shook his head. "I want to help you. I don't want to lean on you for every nuisance that surfaces in my head."

"I am older than you," she pointed out. "I have had more time to settle myself."

"Only a few years. Not sure any amount of age can prepare you to handle what we've been doing," Argrave said skeptically, then laid down beside Anneliese. She moved over to accommodate him. "I just want to be someone you can rely on, that's all."

"I do rely on you. More than you realize, evidently," she rebutted.

"How?" Argrave stared at the ceiling.

"I have always been looking for something to herald. A cause, an ideal... something to be a part of. Something to belong in. I never belonged anywhere," she held her hand up in the air. "I thought Veiden was becoming that, ever so slowly. It was a nation—even an empire—to build, surrounded by people I respected who might respect me in turn. I just needed to prove myself."

"Do you miss it?" Argrave questioned, though he was afraid of the answer.

"I was getting to that," she lowered her hand. "Maybe I could have built a life there. From what you say of the 'me' in your world... it seems I did, once. I cannot speak to my happiness there, of course, nor even of its veracity."

She moved closer and placed her hand on his chest, and he turned to look at her.

"But I have found something to herald. Your cause, fighting against Gerechtigheit. And I feel like I am where I belong, now."

Argrave stayed silent, putting his hand atop her own. After a time, he said, "Let's see if you sing that same tune when we're fifty feet underground in a cavern of bugs again."

She laughed, disturbing the quiet of their stone room in the Lionsun Castle.

Argrave turned back towards the ceiling, finally feeling a bit tired. “Now that I know what I do... I feel like I need to rush out, head to the northwest, join up with Orion, and tackle this damned plague immediately. Gerechtigheit must be cackling at what I have done.”

“Patience,” she urged. “Rushing things will do much more harm than good. You will fail if you rush.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “And... as much as I wish to help Elias... it’s difficult to accept that I just have to leave him, trapped in a siege.”

“Margrave Reinhardt said he offered to rescue his son, but Elias refused,” Anneliese pointed out soundly. “Elias himself does not wish to be removed from the situation.”

“Not sure if I’ll accept that explanation if he dies because of Vasquer’s scheme,” Argrave looked to Anneliese.

Unlike all his other worries, she offered no answer.

### Jackal Among Snakes

#### **Chapter 167: Captive Audience**

“You are fine with meeting him?” questioned Reinhardt, who ate a plain, unseasoned cut of beef with only water as a side.

“I am. In truth, I have a poor memory of the happenings that day,” Rose said truthfully, whose decadent breakfast meal stood in stark contrast to the Margrave’s ascetic portion. She shared the Margrave’s prominent features—red hair and red eyes. Her legs were hidden underneath the table, but her chair had two wooden wheels on the side. “What rumors spread say he is much different than when I knew him. But then, it has been near eight years...”

The Margrave leaned closer. “Are you certain? Do not push yourself for my sake.”

She gave a nod of confirmation, then picked at her food. Beside her, a gray-haired young woman with bright orange eyes ate in quiet. The three present were all part of or soon to be part of the Parbon family. A small staff of servants tended to them, while knights stood on guard at the doors. As most of the rest of the Lionsun Castle, the place was made of carved stone.

The Margrave looked down to a letter just beside him on the table. It had a wax seal on it depicting a swordfish, split from being opened. Reinhardt scanned the closing once more.

*Though I support your cause, you are brash. If you end this war with no plans for what comes after, the entire realm will be shattered by would-be kings pressing whatever vague claim they might have. Winter has stalled the war. Take this time to find a proper claimant. Having an undisputed, supported claimant against King Felipe will keep the realm whole and may even attract undecided supporters to our cause. I will make no suggestions through letter, barring that my daughter has refused. I will write, however, that some rumors of grandiose feats from Mateth are truer than you might think, and those you despise may simply be misunderstood.*

*When things have settled at Mateth, I intend on visiting. I hope we can discuss this in further detail when I do.*

*Until then, be well.*

*Duke Enrico of Monticci*

The Margrave lifted his head and let out a long sigh, staring at his daughter. His face was wrought by complexity, but he slowly fell into a smile as he watched his daughter eat.

"If you would, continue to speak to him and judge his character while he is here. Test him thoroughly. Provided he does not make you..." the Margrave trailed off, judging his daughter's reaction to the idea.

"I'm fine, father," Rose insisted.

"That's good," the Margrave nodded, then took a drink of water. "I plan on having him stay for some time."

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Argrave and Anneliese stepped idly around the gargantuan wall blocking the sole valley between the Burnt Desert and the lands of Vasquer. Two guards walked behind them, watching, and all the knights stationed obviously had been given command to keep an eye on them. His Brumesingers walked a bit sluggishly behind the two of them. They looked like they had overeaten. Evidently there were many good souls to eat in the Lionsun Castle.

The winds were harsh so high up, and likely doubled in force by the funneling of the valley. Argrave and Anneliese wore their thicker gray dusters, both still dirty from traversing the mountain highway. A long time ago, Argrave would have found such a thing intolerable. But he was used to the roads by this point.

"I never imagined such wonders existed in the world. Be it in the Burnt Desert, or here in Vasquer... humans make grand things," she concluded, gazing at the gargantuan taupe lion statue with an enchanted jewel gleaming like a sun in its jaw. Her Starsparrow perched on her wrist, eating magic seeds from her hand.

Argrave paused with her. "That jewel replenishes all of the enchantments on the wall. It looks like a sun... and it harvests the sun's energy, too. It wasn't made by Vasquer, though, nor House Parbon."

"You know much," Reinhardt cut in, and Argrave turned his head. He hadn't heard the man's approach past the fast winds atop the gargantuan wall, and he scolded himself mentally. Even if the Margrave had granted him accommodation, it did not make them allies. He should have gotten Galamon.

"Margrave Reinhardt," Argrave paid his respects with a slight bow, and Anneliese mimicked him a second later.

The Margrave wore his white plate armor even this early in the morning. He came to stand before the two of them. He was just shy of Anneliese's height.

"My men tell me that one of the rooms went unused," he noted, ruby eyed gaze alternating between the two of them.

Argrave raised a brow, saying nothing in response.

“Rumor has it you are betrothed to Nikoletta of Monticci,” he continued, his disapproval evident in his words if not his tone.

Argrave shook his head at once. “That was never officiated. And it never will be, now.”

The Margrave shifted on his feet, perhaps not expecting such a response. “You throw away much. The sole heir of House Monticci...”

“I throw away nothing at all,” Argrave disagreed. “Nothing could compare to what I’ve already got. I’ll never compromise on her, no matter what’s offered.”

Argrave said his words boldly, causing Anneliese looked down bashfully. The Margrave stepped away, gazing out over the walls and into the city of Parbon at the foot of the mountains.

“War has a way of whittling away that steadfastness. I pray that does not become the case with you,” the Margrave shook his head. “There are a few things you should know. Most of the lords of the south have locked down the roads, barring any travel, even trade, to prevent this plague from spreading.”

“What?” Argrave frowned. “Well, we can stay off the roads, then.”

“Maybe. But patrols abound, and you have much cargo to haul.” The Margrave looked up into Argrave’s eyes. “And I don’t think you should travel, either.”

“I have things to do,” Argrave disagreed. “Too important to not take my chances, at that. And moreover, with things as terrible as they are, your top priority should be reaching out to Jast!” Argrave insisted, stepping closer. “That’s the closest thing to a center of magic in the world, other than the Tower of the Gray Owl, maybe. If you want to find ways to abate, to combat this plague—”

Reinhardt raised a hand up to interrupt Argrave. “I am still considering measures. Ordering roadblocks was one of them. For future actions...”

“Roadblocks, pfft,” Argrave shook his head. “Why? Do you think refugees spread the disease, when there’s been not a single village that’s been razed? This is something already in the cities, Margrave. Reach out to Jast. This disease *must* take your top priority,” he insisted.

The Margrave inhaled and sighed. “I must...”

“More will be lost by indecision than wrong decision. This disease is virulent and highly contagious,” Anneliese supported him.

“There’s no proof of that,” one of the Margrave’s knights disagreed.

The Margrave looked torn, but he eventually shook his head. “My daughter has consented to accepting a personal apology,” he changed the subject.

It was Argrave’s turn to feel uncomfortable. He did have a reason to speak with his daughter beyond merely apologizing. Talking with her might be important for dealing with Orion. All that said, he was to apologize for something that he had never done to a person who was badly affected. It weighed at him a little, but not enough to call it off.

“Moreover... Elias mentioned you told him of a way to heal Rose,” Reinhardt noted.

Argrave frowned. "He remembered that?"

"Should he not have?" Reinhardt questioned coldly.

"Far from it. I meant what I said, I just figured he would never trust a word out of my mouth," Argrave held his hand out. "Her legs can be fixed."

"Hmm..." the Margrave mused, stepping away. "We will talk again later. Dinner, perhaps. For now, one of my—" he paused. "Five of my men will lead you to Rose," he corrected. "I will expect you to go alone. These knights of mine will be mages."

"Don't know why that's relevant," Argrave acted oblivious.

"You should. Between that tunnel—gods know how you found it—and my horse, you owe me much," the Margrave shook his head, and then walked away.

Argrave stood there agape. Anneliese looked at him with one brow raised—he had never told her the story of stealing the Margrave's horse. Soon enough, as promised, five men came to Argrave, ready to escort him to Rose of Parbon.

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Stain opened two double doors stretching up to the ceiling, putting his back into the effort. He fixed his tousled brown hair and looked back, where Elias waited. Together, the two of them entered into a banquet hall. Though the place was decadent, its decorations were sparse now, and the only bit of furniture in the room was a single gargantuan rectangular table made to accommodate a hundred people. Each and every chair was filled, presently.

A fat man sat at the head of the double, wearing an oversized doublet without sleeves. His shirt's bright red color made him resemble a tomato. Though still overweight, loose skin on his arms indicated he had once been very fat. He was bald and had genial green eyes. A tall and skinny woman sat beside him. She had a shrewish, stern look to her with great strength in her dark eyes, and she wore her brown hair bound by jewels in a bun atop her head. The man was Duke Marauch of Elbraille. His wife, Duchess Christine of Cael, was the one beside him.

All of the other chairs were occupied by servants of the castle—maids, male attendants, knights, noble councilmen. There was a great disparity in status between many, but all ate the same thing—a quarter loaf of bread, two slices of meat, and a simple stew of vegetables. The Duke and his Duchess were no exception.

As Elias glanced around, the Duke spotted him. The man had a bright, childlike glee to him as he smiled, half-rising to stand. "Young master Elias!" he called out. His wife slapped his chest lightly, forcing him to sit down.

Elias strode over with Stain just beside him. "Duke Marauch," he greeted with a polite slight bow.

"Have a seat," he pointed to the place of honor beside him. "I reserved it for you."

"Thank you," he took the seat, and Stain was seated someplace not far. There was already a plate of food waiting for both of them, untouched.



“Emm...” the Duke paused, glancing between Elias’ plate and him. “If you’d like, I can get you more food. You are a large man... muscled, and it’d be best if—”

His wife swatted his fingers. “Don’t think of it, Marauch. No exceptions, not even for the lion.”

His jawls tremored as his head quickly swiveled from his wife to Elias. “Emm... forgive me, but—”

“I am fine, thank you,” Elias interrupted before the Duke could retract his statement. “I should be subject to the ration as much as anyone else.”

“The young lord is so magnanimous,” Duke Marauch blubbered. “Would that more take after you, the world would be a better place.”

Elias had learned much about the Dukedom of Elbraille in his time here, even if it was not the purpose of coming here. He had no doubts that they would be steadfast allies in the battle to come. The Duke was a kindhearted person, if a bit slow. These two traits allowed his sharp-tongued wife to roll right over him. Though he had met worse people, she was selfish, and desperately grasped for power.

“Honestly...” Elias began, picking up the piece of bread. He dipped it in the vegetable soup. “I am impressed by the Duke’s adherence to this ration. It has increased my opinion of you greatly.”

The Duke smiled brightly, his thin lips hidden by fat cheeks turning into a crescent moon. “Well, I—”

“He should strut about, stomach bursting from his doublet, while people outside die to plague? Would only make things worse than he’s already made them,” Duchess Christine commented, tearing a piece of bread apart with her wiry fingers.

Stain tapped his fork against his plate, smiling. Elias knew that look—he was angry. He hated the Duchess. Stain had informed Elias that the Duchess had been the source of most of the corruption in the city that generated initial outrage.

In addition, she may have been behind the public executions performed by Elbraille’s knights that caused this siege to happen. Though the besiegers were not genuinely a threat, the Duke did not wish to order his knights to suppress things forcibly. Hostile actions at this point would only exacerbate things.

“Regarding the plague...” Elias diverted the subject. “I have been having my father’s court mage, Helmuth, examine it.”

Though Elias had been talking to the Duke and Duchess alone, several people quieted to listen to Elias’ next words. He grew nervous and took a deep breath to continue.

“The disease appears as distorted, waxy skin that feels as hard as stone to the touch. It spreads from there. Anything it spreads to loses all sensation—touch, pain, both are gone. It appears most commonly on the hands.”

Elias looked around, ensuring everyone processed what he’d said. “For some people, it spreads very slow, and indeed can stop after a certain point. For the unluckier people...” he shook his head. “When it reaches an organ and affects that organ... it causes failure. Lungs, hearts, stomach... And the brain... well, the brain is an exception,” Elias shook his head.

The Duke was the only one who remained able to eat as Elias continued. “For the brain, it’s... it’s like rabies. Makes people... act irrationally, even hostile.” Elias crossed his arms and leaned on the table. “That’s why it’s spreading so quickly. The worst afflicted spread it. And worse yet... the plague doesn’t seem to be entirely organic. There is something... mystical about it, according to Helmuth’s sight.”

“Bah,” the Duchess waved her hands. “These people—so foolish. They demand my husband’s head for crimes he did not commit, ignoring Vasquer, our common enemy, at their doorstep. The snake is laughing as we tear each other apart.”

Elias stared at the Duchess, red eyes cold. As he came to know the Duchess better, things fell into place in his head. The Duke would probably never support Vasquer without her coercion. She was sure that she had been the lynchpin behind their association, and now she so deftly played the supporter.

Stain shared Elias’ sentiment, tapping one foot against the ground quickly. Elias pushed his plate to draw his attention, then gave the lightest shake of his head to abate his companion’s rage. Yet as he sat there, he considered something the Duchess had said.

“A common enemy...” Elias repeated. His gaze grew distant. “People always unite against a common enemy.”

“So you would think,” the Duchess continued, oblivious to Elias’ true thoughts. “But instead they cry of corruption, unable to accept their own laziness as the source of their misery.”

Stain looked ready to blow his stack, but Elias rose. “Excuse us. I’ve remembered I forgot to do something,” he said diplomatically, then pushed Stain’s chair out, bidding him to follow.

“But... you didn’t finish eating,” the Duke said, watching Elias concernedly.

“You enjoy it,” Elias gestured, then strode away while loosening the collar on his shirt. Behind, he heard his wife inform the Duke that he could not, in fact, enjoy it.

Once they exited back into the hallway, Stain said quietly, “Glad I’m not the only one that can’t stand that miserable d—”

“A common enemy, Stain,” Elias interrupted. “It was right in front of me, but I never saw it. Instead, we’ve been trapped in a siege for weeks.”

Stain looked at his friend, perplexed.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 168: Looking Backwards**

Why was Argrave wasting his time talking with the crippled daughter of Margrave Reinhardt? That was a good, if somewhat cruel, question. But the answer to that question was the same as why he was here in the Lionsun Castle at all—information gathering.

The meeting with Orion, though still some weeks away, was looming over his head like a guillotine. As far as Argrave knew, there were few people directly connected with the original ‘Argrave.’ Rose of House Parbon had spent her early days as a ward in the royal palace. Ruleo, a main character in the original ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ had a very unfortunate entanglement with Argrave in the past. Beyond those two, only the royal family had any significant connection with Argrave.

Provided nothing went astray, he planned on extracting whatever knowledge he could about himself from the chairbound girl. Rose of Parbon was a sweet person, and that would make things considerably easy... or so he hoped. Perhaps this was an unnecessary venture. Nevertheless, Argrave thought it might be important to learn some things before speaking with Orion of Vasquer, who was soon to take the top of the list of 'most dangerous people Argrave had spoken to.' That list included the Alchemist.

The five guardsmen led Argrave to the peak opposite the one housing the wyvern. True to the Margrave's words, each and every one of them was a mage. Argrave could see the magic within them. He was glad to see them, as it gave him the chance to discern what each rank of mage's magic would look like in his sight. They weren't exactly labelled with convenient letters. Considering the magic within them was less dense than Anneliese's, he was sure that they must have been C-rank, or perhaps on the lower end of B-rank.

Though he debated asking them as they walked along in silence, he never had the chance. One of them stepped forward and opened a large stone door, and then three entered. The remaining two stood behind Argrave, trapping him. He gave a coy smile and entered without a complaint, careful to duck beneath the door lest he slam his forehead.

The apartment was much more wondrous than those he'd seen elsewhere. The place had been painted elaborately, hiding all the bits of gray stone. Bookshelves had been made into trees on the walls, and the rest of the mural depicted vast plains with horses roaming them. Opposite the grand mural, there was a large window that allowed one a grand view of all of Vasquer. This must have been personally prepared by the Margrave and was a good testament to his love for his daughter.

The daughter in question sat in the center of the room, waiting. She was in a simple wooden chair that had smoothly cut wheels and convenient handles. One of her legs was missing from above the knee. The other looked undamaged, but was terribly small, indicating something was wrong with it. She was small, appearing somewhat frail, and she had the hallmark of House Parbon on display—bright red hair, brighter red eyes.

Argrave stepped forward, and his knightly escorts spread throughout the room. All of them faced him, evidently ready to attack him if he tried anything.

"Hello, Lady Rose," he greeted at once, giving a polite bow.

"...hello," she returned after a moment's pause, staring up at him. Her eyes didn't give off an impression of weakness at all. "You have... are you truly Argrave?"

"Is it the eyes that cast doubt?" he questioned, placing one hand against his face. "Well, I suppose it has been... many years," he trailed off, not knowing the exact number of years.

She placed her hands on her lap. "My father tells me you are here to apologize."

"That's right," Argrave confirmed, then glanced around. With the presence of the cold knights, he found it a bit difficult to avoid any awkwardness. He supposed this should not be easy for him.

Argrave cleared his throat. "I have much to say about the matter... but I feel it would be best to get to the point. I apologize for causing the severe injuries to your legs," he lowered his head deeply and

placed his hand to his chest. "I altered your life unforgivably, and so I will not dare hope for forgiveness. Nonetheless, I wish for you to know I harbor deep regret."

In the silence that followed, Argrave heard her take a deep breath and exhale. He felt he'd been sufficiently glib, and he hoped she'd buy it. He had a lot to learn from her.

"Do you remember the season in which this happened?"

Argrave lifted his head. *No*, was what his mind was screaming, but he could not say that. Considering it was a horseback accident...

"Spring," he said with confidence, though it was a total guess.

"Winter, actually," she corrected, causing Argrave to tense up. The knights seemed to bristle at this discrepancy—it marked he didn't care enough to remember, or so they would think.

Perhaps Rose sensed this, or perhaps Argrave merely got lucky, for she continued, "But spring and winter are so close to each other, perhaps it is my memory that is off," she charitably waved her hand.

Rose's gaze moved between the knights. She pursed her lips, and then waved. "Please, good knights, give us some time alone."

"My lady..." one of them protested.

"Give me my freedom to choose, at the very least," she smiled. It seemed to strike a chord with the knights, and they all left quickly. Once they were gone, Rose looked up at Argrave. "You could convince me you were not the same boy I knew all those years ago, during that winter..."

"What has changed since then?" Argrave politely questioned, smiling somewhat.

"Well... to start with, you would not so patiently wait to be invited to sit all those years ago," Rose said. "Please," she gestured for an empty chair.

Argrave said his thanks, then pulled the chair to sit beside a table near the Margrave's daughter.

"Do you still hope for a betrothal with me?" she began.

Had Argrave been drinking, he most certainly would have choked just then. Instead, he kept his gaze on her eyes and said plainly, "No. I have other commitments."

She raised a brow, then rolled her chair closer until she sat opposite the table. "Nikoletta of Monticci?"

"Anneliese of... you wouldn't know it," he shook his head. "My travelling companion."

"The snow elf?" she tilted her head. When Argrave nodded, she seemed surprised. "Then you really have changed."

"How so?" Argrave furrowed his brows.

She looked out the window into the plains of southern Vasquer. "I recall that you made comments about cutting off elven ears when we took a carriage tour of Diraccha."

*So, Argrave was a racist*, he noted mentally. “Nothing changes one’s opinion of another more than exposure,” he dialogued casually.

“And halting an invasion—this was your exposure?” she looked back to him.

“No,” Argrave shook his head with a smile. “A mercenary. Galamon. He taught me more than anyone besides—” he stopped himself from saying ‘his father,’ because ‘Argrave’ didn’t exactly have a good father figure. “He taught me about strategy, honor, loyalty, reliability, and... ways to cope,” he finished vaguely, hoping she’d catch the bait.

“Cope?” she took the bait.

“You mentioned your memory of the events was off,” Argrave gestured towards her. “There are big holes in my childhood. And... well, I shouldn’t get into this,” he shook his head, acting hesitant.

“Please, I can listen,” she insisted.

Argrave bit his lip. “I don’t want to talk about how hard I had things. It trivializes...” his gaze darted to her legs, then off to the side. “...trivializes what I did to you. And it isn’t trivial. I did something horrible.”

Rose looked genuinely affected by his words, and Argrave felt guilty that they were all empty. They sat in the silence, neither looking at the other.

“I heard rumors... that Induen enjoys orphaning children,” Rose said lightly.

Argrave looked at her, trying to act as though she’d struck a sensitive spot.

“I see,” she nodded slowly.

“Some learned men say that the mind deliberately represses some memories that are... traumatic,” Argrave said suggestively. “Like I said, there are big holes in my memory.” He finally looked at her, locking his golden-eyed gaze on hers. “People tell me I was a terrible person. And I do remember doing terrible things. But... I would like to turn a new leaf. Can I... no, I shouldn’t,” he turned away.

“You can talk to me,” she rolled her chair a bit forward.

Argrave refused to meet her gaze for a few seconds, then turned over. “Can you help me recount things? I want to make things right. With you—with everyone.” He turned out to the window, eyes distant. “I was so far gone that I didn’t even realize half the things I was doing were wrong.”

Rose looked hesitant, but she did eventually nod. “Alright. I can help you with that. In return... you’ll have to answer some of my questions about your travels,” she bartered.

“You... I don’t know how you can agree so easily,” Argrave said emotionally. “Yeah. Anything you want to know.”

Argrave felt the filthiest he had ever been, but the prospect of meeting Orion kept the façade right over his face. He’d be sure to get what he needed to know.

#####

“Little Argrave had a stutter?” Anneliese questioned curiously. As ever, they watched the suns set together, sitting on the edge of the Lionsun Wall, gazing out beyond the mountains.

“So Rose says...” Argrave shook his head. “He lost his mother at eight. Induen’s doing. Little Argrave watched, apparently. Unfortunately, Rose never met her.”

Anneliese looked disappointed, but she quickly refocused. “Anything useful for dealing with Orion? Your—his—relationship with the man?”

“Rose’s knowledge had an eight-year gap. She left Diraccha when she was thirteen. I did learn how old I am, though,” he looked to Anneliese. “Twenty.”

“Young,” Anneliese raised a brow.

“Younger than ‘me,’” Argrave put his thumbs against his chest. “Though only by two—no, it would be three years, now.” Argrave lowered his hands and clasped them together. “Bottom line is, I don’t think Orion hates me. And that’s all I need.”

“Yet something troubles you,” Anneliese noticed.

“I don’t know. It was weird,” Argrave shook his head. “She kept asking all these questions about me. Wouldn’t call it friendly, per se, but... I knew something was up. Like father, like daughter, like son... all of the Parbons are terrible at hiding things. It made it difficult to learn what I wanted... but I’d say it was sufficient.” He turned his head to Anneliese. “And we were also invited to dinner.”

Anneliese raised a brow.

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 169: Stay Awhile and Listen**

The family of House Parbon ate in a quiet, if harmonious atmosphere. The Margrave ate the same thing he had with every meal—a simple steak, unseasoned, with water. His eyes fell upon the gray-haired woman beside his daughter, still eating quietly. “Is everything alright, Ridia?” the Margrave questioned.

“Oh,” she lifted her head, as though drawn from a daydream. “Oh—umm, yes. Everyone has been very kind to me here.”

The Margrave nodded. “I apologize that my son could not be here. I promise you that Elias will make it up to you as your fiancé.”

“He can hardly be—”

The doors to the room opened and Ridia flinched, cutting her sentence off. Argrave stood there, wearing the same gray leather armor as he had the past few days—it was clean now, though. His three companions stood just behind him. He scanned the room.

“Thought there’d be more than just us...” Argrave said hesitantly.

Reinhardt gestured to the chairs opposite Ridia and Rose. “Sit,” he commanded.

Argrave nodded without protest, then moved to sit. The Margrave took a piece of paper and stowed it away in his pocket, then adjusted some of his cutlery. Argrave hesitated to sit right next to Reinhardt, but eventually he swallowed and did so, sitting quite rigidly and politely.

He briefly looked at Rose of Parbon. He wasn't particularly worried about her—he was sure he left a good impression, even if he wasn't 100% confident he'd sold her on his ideas. Someone would need to be delusional to guess the truth about Argrave. No one would assume he was a different person entirely, even in a world of magic.

"Fill four plates," the Margrave commanded a serving staff off to the side.

"Ah—three," Argrave amended. "Galamon prepares his own food—he's very particular. It would be impossible to sustain such a physique otherwise, no?"

The Margrave frowned, then amended, "Bring platters, let them serve themselves. Some are... larger."

Argrave had no protest to this. He greeted everyone sitting at the table with silent gestures, then finally locked his gaze on the Margrave.

"So, what did you wish to talk to me about?" Argrave smiled.

The Margrave fiddled with his cutlery, then planted a fork in his steak. "I sent men to the Low Way of the Rose to verify your claims," he began. "They've been... delayed."

Anneliese frowned and tapped Argrave's foot with hers. He didn't turn his head, but he acknowledged her signal. This was something they'd devised in private. Reinhardt was lying, and her tapping her foot against his was their signal.

"I will accommodate you well as long as you are here," the Margrave continued, ignorant of their exchange. "I bear no hostility towards you. Considering the plague and the war, I think it would be best if you stayed. Things are dangerous."

"The patriarch of House Parbon is scared of disease and war? Never could have pictured that," Durran interjected.

"Durran, let's save the provocations for people who can't command a legion of knights to swarm into here," Argrave held out his hand to silence the man, then smiled pleasantly. "You may know that the Burnt Desert is a little... unsafe, shall we say? One might call it a hellish place. And by 'one,' I mean 'everyone.' A little danger makes life worth living, so I'll be fine to leave as soon as you feel fit. Besides, I have places to be urgently," Argrave added.

The Margrave leaned forward and placed both elbows on the table. "It is... in your... best interest... to stay in my castle," he said awkwardly. Reinhardt was obviously trying to be subtly suggestive, but he was utterly terrible at it.

Argrave frowned and locked eyes with the Margrave. Unlike that staring contest they'd had long ago, the Margrave broke away first.

"Rest assured, I will not again mistreat you," he added. "While I cannot say I will ever forgive what you have done to my daughter... she has." He placed one big, gauntleted hand on her wrist. "And that is more than enough for me to set aside any grudge. You are yours will be guests of honor."

Argrave was half-expecting Anneliese to tap his foot again, but he simply watched Reinhardt meet his gaze.

*He wants me to stay, Argrave realized. What in the world? Why? He's not aggressive, or mad, he's just... I can't make sense of this. I'm having dinner with someone who thinks I crippled his daughter, alongside that very daughter, and they're trying to persuade me to stay?*

Argrave looked to Anneliese for a moment, then turned back to the Margrave. "Well..." he swallowed. "I do have much to ask about the war. Do you think I could ask questions on that front?"

The Margrave took his hand off his daughter's wrist, then said hesitantly, "I try to avoid discussing affairs of state at the family dinners..."

"It's fine," Rose interjected. "We rarely have guests, and I am not so fragile that I would collapse from a few where you speak of the war. You agree, Ridia?"

"Umm... I have no issue," she said quietly.

"But it's your mother's..." he trailed off with a weak voice, then sighed. "Never mind," he continued, voice cold once again. "I will answer what questions you have."

Just then, the serving staff reentered, placing grand platters of food on the center. Argrave eyed the meatier parts of the table.

"Alright," Argrave nodded enthusiastically, moving to get his own portion. "What are the big happenings of the last two months?"

"My brother was slain by Vasquer," the Margrave said heavily, placing both his arms on the table.

Argrave paused before he touched the food on the table, feeling disrespectful. "What?" he asked, and when no answer came, continued, "That's..."

*Good for the rebels*, he left that part unspoken. With no hostage, they had less power over Reinhardt.

"You have my condolences," Argrave offered. "I didn't know Bruno, but I know he was a man of character."

"Hmm," the Margrave grunted gruffly, something Argrave didn't begrudge him.

"From what I know of your people and its culture... that must have weakened support for Vasquer greatly," Anneliese pressed. "And swelled your own ranks with new supporters."

Argrave looked at her curiously.

"That is true," he said, voice dead and harsh as though he loathed that fact.

Anneliese nodded, lost in thought. Then, she continued, "And this plague—has it struck the north as severely as the south?"

Margrave Reinhardt shifted, frowning. "I cannot say with certainty... but people say it has been contained in the northwest."



"And where did it begin moving across the south?" she pressed further. "From one point, or from many at once?"

With her pointed inquiries, Argrave caught onto what she was implying and stiffened. The Margrave was a bit slower and answered her question no more than what she asked. "I am unsure. It simply swept across in an unprecedentedly fast manner."

"Like it was aided," Argrave suggested quietly, and Anneliese lowered her head, point made.

Reinhardt turned to Argrave, expression slowly becoming more and more stern. "You suggest..." he trailed off, perhaps realizing the pointlessness of his question. He set his hand upon the table, slowly clenching it into a fist.

"Would Felipe... stoop so..." the Margrave couldn't even finish his sentence, so intense was his rage.

"He would," Argrave said with a bitter confidence. "That worthless piece of shit definitely would."

The Margrave pushed away his plate of food, all appetite lost. His intense anger was slowly brought under control as he breathed steadily.

"With this happening... all the more reason for you to entreat your ally, Jast," Argrave said. "Magic is the only solution for something like this. Get healers. Hell, ask for the Order of the Gray Owl's help. Their neutrality does not forbid them from offering medical aid, and this is an incredibly dire situation."

"How do you know the plague is dire?" Rose questioned. "You've been absent."

"I've seen it firsthand in the northwest, back when it was in its infancy. I didn't realize it would spread so far," Argrave shook his head, lying easily. "The skin turns waxy, distorts into bumps. It causes organ failure, irrational behavior when it spreads to the brain... and even if it stops spreading, the person never recovers from the damage. Additionally, even if they heal, they continue to spread it, indefinitely."

"...people say it is the wrath of Moder, the goddess of plague and rot," Ridia contributed. "She is angry at the war."

"Spread a deadly disease to protest a deadly war," Durran noted cynically. "Very godlike. Fits with my experience of the idiocy of the gods."

"It's not from the gods," Argrave shook his head. *It's born from man, with some meddling from Gerechtigkeit...*

With everything being brought to light, it felt all the more urgent that Argrave leave. He wanted to stand up and run out. As he was consumed by that thought, he felt a hand on his own, and looked to Anneliese. He smiled lightly at her assurance and clenched her hand. The Margrave watched that exchange, though both of them were oblivious.

"I must go and talk to some people," the Margrave stood. "I... your advice is sound, Argrave, and I will propose it to my council."

"I did nothing at all," Argrave raised one hand humbly.

"All of you... eat well. I apologize for my abrupt departure. Seek me out should you need anything. And your companion..." he stopped besides Galamon, who nearly stared Reinhardt in the eyes despite sitting. "Should you need it, you may replenish your rations. Ask my staff."

"I'm sure he will," Argrave smiled, and Galamon gave him a cold-eyed glance before nodding to the Margrave.

The Margrave left, some knights following him. Argrave turned back to his food. Consuming his thoughts was a strong desire to go and sort some of the information he'd been dealt.

*Only a few things changed, yet it's all spiraling...*

### [Jackal Among Snakes](#)

#### **Chapter 170: Dissonance**

In the days that passed, Argrave's strong suspicion that the Margrave intended for him to stay became a certainty. The head of House Parbon lacked subtlety and had all but said 'you will stay here.' It definitely did not have the same atmosphere as the first time Argrave had been restrained by Reinhardt—he was not yanked about by a rope and tied to posts, and though their party of four was guarded strictly, there was never a hostile atmosphere.

The Margrave continued to insist that the men he sent to the Low Way of the Rose had not yet returned. Argrave had asked some pointed questions to figure out if the Margrave was hiding anything, as though he had something planned for a few days later... but Anneliese insisted that the Margrave bore them no ill will, which was surprise enough.

They were watched quite closely. The only place they had a chance to talk without knights shadowing them was in their assigned quarters, and even there, they waited just outside. A ward was sufficient to stop most of their talk from leaking outside.

"Never would have pictured the fearsome patriarch of House Parbon is just a family man," Durran shook his head, his glaive laid out across his lap. "That gray-haired woman was quite the pretty one."

"Don't even try," Argrave shook his head. "She has a fiancé. And if you mess that up, I'll flay you."

"Too shy for my tastes, don't worry," Durran held his hand out. "The Margrave seems an interesting man... but never a chance to talk to him. Such a shame."

Argrave shrugged, sitting across from Durran in a circle alongside his other two companions. A ward blocked their conversation from any listeners. "To be fair, he spends most of his times in meeting with his vassals devising measures for the war."

"Yeah. He goes to work so his family stays safe, and then once he's home, he spoils them. A family man, like I said." Durran tapped the tip of his wyvern bone glaive. "Though... I guess that'd give him reason to fight harder against our invasions... More to fight for." Durran looked up at Argrave. "Why are we milling about here?"

Argrave uncrossed his legs, then recrossed them, anxious. "This guy keeps coming up with contrivances every damn day to keep us here. He said there was a cave-in at the lower levels of the castle, and he

wasn't sure it'd be safe to leave. What the hell is that? A five-year-old can come up with better lies than that."

Galamon locked eyes with Argrave. "Press the issue," he suggested.

"I may have to, but..." Argrave lowered his head. "Why is he doing this? The only thing I can guess is that he's waiting for a response from someone... Duke Enrico, maybe..."

"I suspect he wishes to ask you a favor," Anneliese suggested, eyes staring off into the distance. "He is merely probing whether or not you are trustworthy. That would explain why he and his daughter are asking you so many questions... indeed, asking *all* of us questions."

"Why not just sneak out?" Durran questioned. "Force our way out, even?"

"Difficult," Galamon shook his head. "It was hard enough for me to... replenish my rations," he looked to Argrave as he said those words with a bitter sarcasm.

Argrave smiled, then supported Galamon's claim, saying, "And I don't want to make the Margrave toss aside what little goodwill I've built up in that icy heart of his. Doing something like that... sneaking out isn't the problem. Someone's going to get hurt, I'm sure of it," he said, pausing as he recalled the unfortunate circumstance with the Stonepetal Sentinels. Argrave held his hand out to amend, "Not us, but them. And the Margrave would care about something like that. His heart might be icy, but that just makes it bigger. He cares for his men."

"Then what do we do?" Durran held his hands out in a shrug.

"Tonight, we're having dinner with them. Again. And I'll press the issue, as Galamon suggested." Argrave rubbed his thumb against his knuckles. "Failing that... I definitely don't plan on staying another night. If no answers come, we'll devise a plan the next morning."

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"I spoke with my councilors," Reinhardt said. "And received some petitioners from the nobles that have thrown in their lot with me. The unanimous consensus is that this plague is a serious matter... and so I heeded your advice. I contacted Jast... and the Order of the Gray Owl, requesting aid," he told Argrave.

Argrave smiled. "My words finally got into that thick head of yours, eh?" he paused, thinking he might be acting overly familiar. "Erm, forget I said that. That's a good development."

The Margrave cleared his throat, then cut into the unseasoned beef he ate every meal. Argrave wasn't sure the man got the proper nutrients.

"What do you think should be the priority moving forward?" Margrave Reinhardt questioned.

Argrave glanced around the table, taking in the expressions of everyone. He hadn't intended to talk about this, and he briefly considered changing the subject... but in the end, he might be able to change things for the better when he had the Margrave's ear.

"The plague, obviously. That has the potential to do the most damage to the people, be they the high and mighty or the weak and decrepit. Until it's abated entirely... or until better methods are found to combat it... it's the most harmful to the world," Argrave finished by pointing to the Margrave. "It's not

the pragmatic thing to do. You may suffer in the war effort. But that is why Felipe deserves to be dethroned, and why it must be you that does it.”

“Hear hear,” Durran raised his glass of wine.

The Margrave shifted, perhaps stirred by Argrave’s words. He set his elbows on the table, then questioned, “And what about your priority?”

“The same,” he replied at once. “This plague—the longer it goes unaddressed, the worse things will get for everyone, no matter who they are. That’s why I intend to head northwest, where people have had it longer. Examining them may help me glean some insight into curing people,” he suggested—only a slight distortion of the truth. “And speaking of my priority,” Argrave continued. “I get the distinct feeling I’m being kept from leaving.”

The Margrave stopped midbite, then lowered his fork. Then, as if trying to appear inconspicuous, he raised the fork up again, and chewed his cut of plain beef all the way through. Argrave waited politely, a bit flabbergasted at how bad this man would be at poker.

“I don’t know what you speak of,” the Margrave finally said. Anneliese tapped his foot to inform of his deception, but it was unnecessary—anyone could tell he was lying.

“Really?” Argrave raised his brows in exaggerated surprise. “So, that cave-in at the lower levels, no one besides you talked about it? None of us felt it? And hell, it happened despite this castle being so heavily enchanted not even one brick has fallen off, once?”

His daughter, Rose, looked away, almost embarrassed as Argrave recounted the excuse her father had used.

“It’s a... six-hundred-year-old castle,” Reinhardt shook his head.

“Mmmhmm,” Argrave nodded with a plastic grin on his face. “And those riders you sent to the Low Way—I didn’t realize your men were so bad at simple scouting tasks. No word from them?”

Reinhardt planted his fork in his steak, then took a long drink of water. “No word,” he said, setting the cup down loudly. Anneliese tapped his foot again.

Argrave leaned back into his chair, keeping his eyes on the Margrave almost lazily. He looked to Rose, and then to Ridia of Jast, almost as if asking them silently if they believed this nonsense.

“I think we’re going to set off tomorrow, Reinhardt,” Argrave said plainly.

“You can’t,” he answered at once.

“Why?” Argrave crossed his arms.

“A snowstorm... comes,” he said weakly.

“This far south?” Argrave noted, almost mockingly by this point. “And with not a cloud in the sky?”

The Margrave remained firm. “You can’t,” he repeated.

Durran stood up, his chair creaking loudly. "I can't listen to this anymore," he said. Argrave looked at him with fierce eyes, concerned the man might do something ridiculous.

"I'm about to burst," Durran continued. "Need to use the privy."

He left quickly, grabbing his glaive leaning against the wall as he left. He practically sprinted out of the room, one hand held to his stomach. Argrave furrowed his brows, then shrugged.

Just then, Anneliese tapped his foot, and he came to attention. Durran was lying.

"Father..." Rose began, reaching her hand out. The dour Margrave looked a bit brighter at that moment, and took her hand. "Give it up. You are worthless at this sort of thing."

The big warrior looked betrayed for half a second, but he gave a long sigh and took his hand away.

"Alright. I suppose I should be honest."

"Uh... yeah," Argrave agreed, one eye lingering on Anneliese. She gave him a quiet nod, then looked out the door where Durran had left. "Starsparrow," he directed her quietly, and she nodded in agreement, casting the druidic spell beneath the table. In not a second, the bird perched atop her shoulder vanished. It moved so quickly no one noticed it at all. Well, nearly no one—Ridia of Jast had been staring at the bird on Anneliese's shoulder, and looked around, confused.

"The truth is... there is something important you should be let in on," Margrave Reinhardt said slowly.

"Is that right?" Argrave anxiously tapped his finger against a fork, casting glances to Anneliese as she focused on watching Durran with her Starsparrow. He had a bad feeling.

"I had my reservations," the Margrave admitted. "Even barring our past association... your relationship with Anneliese. I thought it was whimsy, a flight of fancy from a hot-blooded youth... but there is something more, I believe, and despite the difficulties some might have accepting an elf, she has keen insight and talent in many fields."

Argrave nodded, half-paying attention. "We were blessed to meet, and I count myself among the fortunate to this very day."

"Hmm," the Margrave nodded, fortunately looking off to the side. "Moreover, my daughter agrees that you have changed significantly. You have not met in eight years, as I remember... but she tells me that speaking to you now is like speaking to an entirely different person. I will not presume to know your situation... but considering how Felipe's other children turned out, perhaps it is no surprise you were as you were. Yet time away from them, it seems, has changed you."

Argrave stared, more focused on whatever Durran was doing outside than what the Margrave was saying.

"Tomorrow morning, I will wake you up early," Reinhardt continued.

The bird reentered the room, perching itself back atop Anneliese's shoulders. She opened her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I wish for you to meet my close council... in part to explain what Jast and the Order might help us with, but for other reasons as well."

Anneliese leaned in and whispered, 'wyvern.' Argrave had been waiting for that word, and he stood up quickly.

*The crazy moron is trying to steal the Margrave's wyvern.*

"Before we go on," Argrave began, an excuse quickly prepared. "There is something that I have been meaning to give to you," he spread his arms out grandly. "It has slipped my mind the past few days, but if you don't mind, I'd like to get it now."

The Margrave leaned back in his chair, then gave a slow, confused nod. "Alright."

"Come on, then," Argrave led his companions along. They stood and followed. His Brumesingers rushed into the room, jumping up onto him and scrambling up into hiding within the confines of his clothes. Once they exited, Argrave kept a brisk pace.

"Send the bird out. Slam it into that crazy bastard's skull," Argrave directed Anneliese. "Lead him to a place we can reach him. Galamon and I will get everyone's stuff."

Galamon stopped. "We're going along with this?"

"What, we've got a choice?" Argrave pointed out. "Cup our hands, say sorry? That would never work. He's forced our hand. Let's move,"

"Alright," Anneliese quickly agreed, seeking a safe place to cast her magic.

Argrave and Galamon proceeded. A phrase was repeating in Argrave's head, again and again.

*Crazy bastard.*