

Jackal 221

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 221: King's Bearing

Of late, Argrave had been perfecting the art of looking unapproachable. Having become a trending figure for his recent deeds and already being taller than near everyone around him, he attracted people to him like nothing else. He'd rather avoid people when he was as busy as he was. The fact he was infamous for murder helped with looking unapproachable, fortunately, as did Garm's black and gold eyes.

When Argrave saw a woman he did not recognize skulking near the doorway to his room, he approached quietly and made his voice deeper than it normally was. "Can I help you?"

The woman jumped, then looked up at him, shocked. "I-I... I came here looking for you."

"Why is that?" Argrave kept a stern face.

"The application for... for your status as High Wizard has been approved. Em—and... and for one 'Anneliese.' A conclave of High Wizards will witness you cast a B-rank spell, and then interview you about magic. The details are here," she said, handing off a rolled scroll quickly as though it were aflame.

Argrave looked down at the scroll as the woman hastily left, then smiled and pushed open the door.

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"Quite a hefty list of Magisters," remarked Argrave as Elias stood before him, waiting for his thoughts. "Very good. Well done," he complimented Elias.

"The hardest part was just getting them to agree to meet," Elias shook his head.

Argrave nodded. "If these people pay attention, they know you're associated with me, and would know why you want to meet. The Magisters that stay in the Tower are two breeds—ones interested in Order politics, or ones interested in Order scholarship." Argrave tapped the paper with his hand. "This mental categorization matches up well, it would seem. The scholars could care less about me. Once again, well done, Mina, Elias, Galamon," he thanked each in turn.

"What now?" Mina crossed her arms. "Play them against each other, try and get the best service?"

Argrave wagged his finger. "Not a chance. I can't afford information leaking about my plans. Even with an S-rank mage as an escort, I need to obfuscate my movements. Vasquer can and will tear me apart if Felipe gets a read on my path." Argrave held up the paper. "The fellows here on this page? They're snakes, each and all. I have to choose well, otherwise I'll find myself wrapped by a python after they sell me out." Argrave turned the paper back towards himself, gaze growing distant as he thought. "Anyone know when—"

The door to the room opened, and Argrave turned his head quickly. Anneliese and Nikoletta entered.

"Good timing," Argrave complimented. "Have fun?"

Anneliese stepped closer. "It was an enlightening outing."

“On two counts, I bet,” Argrave nodded. “Look at this, Anneliese. I’ve got an approval of our advancement test to High Wizard, and a list of opportunists. Considering you’re an Honorary Wizard only, it seems your advancement stands to be a bit different.” Argrave walked to the scroll he’d been given earlier and held it up, double-checking.

“Interesting,” Anneliese nodded, gaze distant as she thought about that. “We can discuss it later.”

Argrave nodded and tossed the scroll aside, watching as the parchment rerolled naturally. “Sure. Right now, I think we should talk about connecting our opportunity with the right opportunist.”

“I can give my thoughts on each,” Elias raised his hand.

“Yeah... sure,” Argrave nodded, though internally he was thinking about the fact that Galamon had gone with them and it was an unnecessary addition.

“Have you any initial ideas?” asked Anneliese, coming to peer over his shoulder at the paper.

“I’m thinking...” Argrave took a deep breath. “Maybe Mina’s had a good idea. Pitting people against each other.”

“What?” Mina crossed her arms defensively when her name was brought up out of the blue.

“Nothing unites rivals like competition,” Argrave lifted his head up. “I’m thinking... maybe two of these meetings coincidentally happen at the same time. And maybe two of these Magisters just so happen to have a heated rivalry with the other. It’ll be difficult to make happen, but it could have some stellar results...”

Elias frowned.

“What?” Argrave looked down at him.

Elias said delicately, “You want to put two S-rank mages who hate each other... in the same room? And agitate them deliberately?”

“People are people, regardless of how much damage they can do,” Argrave dismissed without worry. “I know what I’m doing. But if you don’t want to be there, that’s fine.”

A look passed through Elias’ eye—it was the look of someone who was about to force himself to eat something foul.

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A small gathering of people numbering around fifty convened in a large, ornate marble chamber. All the marble was black, veined with gold. It was a rectangular building, and all of the walls were decorated with giant statues of silver, candles at their feet. The ceiling was large and open, a grand image painted across all of it. If one were to follow it, one could see the tale of Vasquer’s founding; Felipe I riding aback the great snake Vasquer, his legion of snakes combatting an army of elves while the 96 gods of Vasquer watched on with smiles on their faces.

In the center of the room, stairs descended down to a central point where a large granite coffin rested. Black roses budded around the edge of the coffin, their stems bright gold. A banner of Vasquer hung

over the coffin's lid. All gathered bore Vasquer ancestry, though some to a lesser degree than others. Two in particular stood above the crowd, both because of their literal and figurative presence: Orion and King Felipe III.

Orion, garbed in all black, had his hands behind his back. His nails dug into his palm, dripping blood that flowed back into his body like some poor imitation of an Ouroboros manifested from viscera. He stood just beside the king, his face displaying his anger undisguised. The king, with his long black beard and longer black hair growing grayer every day, had no obvious emotions. The two looked very much alike, all the way down to their eyes.

"There should be thousands gathered to honor him," Orion said. "A private funeral with only family does not befit a prince of Vasquer."

"I will not sully the name of Vasquer by making royal funerals more common than celebrations in Dirracha. Induen will have a public funeral, no others," Felipe rebuked, voice flat.

Orion's fingers clenched tighter, but the prince said nothing. Footsteps echoed throughout the marble room as someone new entered. The steps were quiet so as not to disturb any of the assembled. Levin stepped up beside Felipe.

"My apologies. I had to receive Induen's body," Levin whispered quietly.

The king held his hand up and conjured a ward, blocking off their conversation to nearby people. "How is it?" Felipe questioned, looking down at the coffin.

"Well... it is..."

"Do not bumble like a fool searching for kindnesses," Felipe commanded. "The royal family does not soften their words."

Levin held his hands out, rubbing them together to warm them. "The body itself was badly dismembered—both hands severed, leg hanging on by a thread of flesh. Moreover, no one within the town retrieved the body, and ants got to it. Coupled with decomposition from travelling... it is difficult to recognize by the face alone, but I can say with certainty it is Induen."

Orion blinked away tears after hearing the description. Felipe shook his head.

"Another unpresentable body. A disappointment." The king shook his head. "Archduke Regene's body will be displayed in his place. Make it look younger with makeup and none will be the wiser. Levin, you make the—"

"The Archduke is not dead," Orion said incredulously.

"It's inevitable," Felipe said dispassionately. "He cannot be saved. Best to end him now, make good use of him."

"You cannot do this to—"

Felipe turned back and interrupted, "Do not presume to tell me what I cannot do, Orion. It is my place to command, both as your father and the king. You are my heir now, and you must be prepared for rulership." Felipe stepped up to Orion, looking him eye-to-eye. "Listen well—you will stop speaking of

Argrave's role in ending the plague. You will diminish what you have said, and you will tell all you meet that he is a foul kinslayer who brutally murdered both Magnus and Induen."

Orion glared at the king. "I will not lie. Argrave did stop the plague."

"You will do as you are bid," Felipe commanded unflinchingly. "Argrave the Kinslaying Serpent, they call him. I will not tolerate my issue and heir espousing his virtues. He killed my son, shamed Vasquer beyond measure."

"An evil does not erase a virtue. I will not diminish his role in the fight with the Plague Jester," Orion refused.

Felipe took a deep breath as though swallowing his wrath. His face was like stone as he stared down Orion. "Induen was a fool who thought he knew better. He wandered Vasquer, doing as he pleased, when he should have been listening to my orders and learning what I taught him. He put his own desires before that of the family, and now he lays in some cart, his face half-eaten by ants."

The king stepped closer until his nose almost touched his son's. "If you knew better than I did, you would not have allowed Magnus to die at your brother's hands not minutes away from you. You would not have come here begging me to legitimize Argrave, to give the name of Vasquer to a kinslayer and a bastard."

Orion's face was trembling in barely restrained anger.

"Do you want to hit me?" the king questioned. They stared eye-to-eye for several seconds, but Felipe finally shook his head, almost disappointed his son restrained himself. "You won't. I had other plans for you, but it's clear to me you have an issue that needs to be settled." Felipe nodded steadily. "You will find Argrave. And you will be the one to deal with him."

"What?" Orion's anger gave way for confusion.

"This will put to bed these disgusting validations you've given the bastard," Felipe prodded Orion's chest. "And you can be taught a little more of what it means to be king. You will learn what it means to place the dynasty before the self."

Felipe finally turned away, leaving Orion standing there.

"Levin," the king said, turning back towards the coffin. "As Orion is now my son and heir, when Parbon is stripped of their lands, all shall be given to you—their mines, their Lionsun Castle, everything. If I catch but a hint of you impeding Orion... you will not live much longer."

"I look forward to setting foot in the castle," Levin put his hand to his chest.

"Continue to keep your ears open and your mouth shut, and you may live to do so," Felipe advised.

Orion stepped away, shattering his father's ward with the back of his hand with seeming ease. Felipe turned back from the sudden change, watching his son move closer to Magnus' coffin and kneel down, offering a prayer.

The discord was obvious to all present... yet even still, none dared to gossip, and none made to leave. All felt fixed in place by the gray iron gaze of King Felipe III, and none would dare leave before he did.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 222: A New Test

"You're awfully casual about this whole thing," said Elias as Argrave enjoyed a pleasant breakfast.

Argrave ate a great heap of eggs. He hadn't liked them much before, but he found them quite delicious now, perhaps because he'd been eating frog legs and hippo jerky in a swamp not too long ago.

Argrave chewed and swallowed before saying, "Some people are blessed with great poise in stressful situations. Myself, though, I earned this temperament after dealing with the countless stresses of life facing Gerechtigkeits. I appreciate your admiration. I often feel unappreciated for my calm nature."

"No, you—" Elias shook his head. He struggled with sarcasm. "More and more troops take their place in key positions around the tower. It'll be difficult for you to leave."

"I have to become a High Wizard—not my fault the test is scheduled a bit late. It might be just a title, but it opens a lot of doors, earns me a lot of prestige. It'll make negotiations with the Magisters easier, too. On top of all that, a lot of valuable ingredients for alchemy you can't buy without a high status in the Order. Last but not least... it'll be good to maintain strong ties with this Tower," Argrave concluded with a shrug. "Besides, leaving... that should be your concern, no? Young lord of House Parbon," Argrave fiddled with his fork, twisting it about in his fingers.

"That's why I'm leaving tomorrow," Elias nodded. "My father is preparing a formidable escort. He'll take us all out. Once again, I extend the offer to take you—"

Argrave raised his hand. "Forget it. Be careful, though. Vasquer won't hesitate to attack this escort of yours. It's practically a godsend to them."

The act of raising his hand left his plate vulnerable, and Anneliese deftly stabbed out. She impaled a whole egg and tore it away ruthlessly. Argrave gave her a betrayed look as she enjoyed the egg but could not help but smile after a time.

Elias shifted on his feet nervously, then once again counseled, "Every day you wait to meet the Magisters, you—"

"Thanks for your concern, really," Argrave twisted his fork against his plate, giving his best reassuring smile. "But go. I'll be fine."

Elias nodded. "I hope for your sake that's true."

"Bet you'd never thought you'd think that of me, huh?" Argrave noted.

Elias had a ponderous look for a moment, but he said nothing about the matter. "The room is paid up for six more days. You'll still have to buy food from the places below—no deliveries, either. Felipe might pay some gullible fool with power but no sense to attack you, so stay wary."

Argrave nodded and waved to Elias, and then the heir to the Margravate opened the door and stepped out, preparing for the day's tasks. Just before he left fully, however, he paused.

“Oh—Mina told me to tell you this,” Elias stopped. “You still owe her for that favor, and she’s going to let the interest build up before cashing it in.” As Argrave sat there, mouth agape, Elias nodded and left quietly.

“Oh, gods...” Argrave planted his elbows on the table, entwining his hands and stewing over the words. “What does she have planned for me? She’s devious. I know it’ll be something awful.” Argrave shook his head. “No, I can’t think about this now. Let’s focus on the matter at hand.”

“More and more troops are coming,” Anneliese noted, relaxing slightly now that they were alone. “All of them leaving Dirracha, coming here...”

“Meaning security in the capital is laxer,” Argrave nodded. “How might that be our concern?”

“I wonder,” Anneliese smiled.

Argrave laughed lightly. “I suppose the whole point of stalling like this is that it won’t be our concern. Not later, at least.” He took a deep breath and straightened his back, doing light stretches. “So—the test for High Wizardry. You prepared?”

“It is more you I am concerned for,” She shook her head. “You have learnt no spells originating from the Order—both matrixes you have mastered are foreign to them. Even I have learned some of their spells, but not you.”

Argrave shrugged. “They can see the B-rank matrix. If they give me trouble... well, I’m good at solving problems.”

“Then it seems all we can do is proceed,” Anneliese concluded.

With everything in place, they enjoyed a pleasant breakfast together in solitude.

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“We apologize for the long delay for the test,” a polite Wizard of the Order spoke to Argrave as the two of them rode up the central elevator, feet fixed to the stone tablets. “Given the extraordinary circumstances of... well, the extraordinary circumstance of your recent...”

“Kinslaying?” Argrave finished.

“Um... yes,” the man meekly confirmed. “We had to seek out test-givers that were entirely ignorant of your events, so as to avoid bias in the confirmation. These people have been engaged in scholarly research for some time, and are consequently entire ignorant of your recent acts. Rest assured—the test will be fair and balanced.”

“Fair and balanced, huh?” Argrave laughed. “Those words are a bit tainted where I’m from, at least for some people.”

The man looked quite confused, but the stone platforms finally reached the floor they’d been trying to reach and Argrave did not need to elaborate. The man stepped off first, Argrave following just behind. They walked quite quickly, Argrave easily keeping pace with his longer legs.

Eventually, they made it to a room with a much larger door than most others. After opening it up, a wide-open room awaited, completely barren barring a table with chairs in the back. The protective enchantments were far thicker than most anywhere else. It was a testing room, some bizarre cross between an interview room and a colosseum. Here, mages could exercise their spells to their fullest extent without damaging anything.

“Good luck, sir Argrave,” the man bowed, then quickly left, shutting the door behind him.

Argrave was left alone in the vast open space. With the vision lent to him by Garm’s eyes, he could discern each of the mages before him were certainly B-rank mages of significant prowess, perhaps even beyond B-rank. If they were A-rank, the changes their body underwent by becoming A-rank were not outwardly displayed, and so Argrave was uncertain.

Being alone before four High Wizards in a vast, empty room was a good way to whittle away confidence—perhaps that was the intent—but Argrave strode forward boldly, doing his best to appear big and confident. The big part was easy because he *was* big, but the confidence... he couldn’t be so sure.

“Good morning,” Argrave greeted cheerfully, his voice bouncing against the walls loud enough to make anyone self-conscious. “It’s a very pleasant day, isn’t it?”

“It is,” the man in the center of the four answered—a cold-eyed man with a graying beard. “Let us get down to business, shall we?”

“No time for pleasantries? All the better,” Argrave nodded, a plastic smile on his face.

The man nodded, then picked up a piece of paper. “Wizard Argrave... named Wizard a little over six months ago, your thesis marked for ‘special interest.’ Age... twenty,” the man looked up from the paper, staring down Argrave. “I am obligated to say this by the Order. This test has rigorous anti-cheat measures—the enchantments in the walls and floors are not merely for protection. The penalties for cheating can go up to the point of expulsion from the Order. If you wish, you may call off the test now. You will not be given another opportunity to do so.”

Argrave shook his head and scratched beneath his nose. “I’m fine.”

“We are aware of your status,” a woman by the cold-eyed man’s side said.

Argrave paused and took a breath. “What does that mean?”

“It means that your father cannot have any bearing on the results of this test,” the woman continued.

Hearing their complete ignorance, Argrave laughed loudly. “Old Felipe? I imagine he’d be the last person to sway this towards a positive outcome.”

“Alright,” the woman nodded, content. She launched into professional instructions, saying, “To begin with, before administering other portions of the test, you must pass a bare minimum rank requirement,” she explained. “You will need to demonstrate any B-rank spell that you have learned—one will suffice. If this spell is illusion magic, special measures will—”

“It’s elemental,” Argrave cut in.

"Alright," the woman nodded. "Then, please turn in that direction and demonstrate the spell," she directed, pointing off to her left. "Ensure your hand is outstretched, and the matrix unobscured."

Argrave pulled his glove off and rolled down his sleeve, then turned and held out his hand as instructed. He formed the matrix ever-so-slowly, so as to give his onlookers ample time to examine it. Once the fourth dimension was put into place, he set the spell into motion. It whirled about in impossible ways, then, [Pavise Gale] activated. A knight of wind sent out a tremendous gale with a backhand of a great tower shield.

The wind raged throughout the place for a time, then the man on the far right of the table immediately commended, "Excellent. Well done, Argrave."

Another concurred, but the man with cold eyes interrupted, saying, "Hold a moment. Is that a spell that can be found in Order libraries?"

"Which Order?" Argrave asked. "If you mean the Order of the Rose, yes."

"So, it's not a spell commonly used by mages trained here," the man continued, his words seeming to draw people's attention. "It's something none of us are familiar with. More easily fa—"

"Well, I could bring the book I learned the spell from," Argrave said at once, before the man's words could make too much sense. "The four of you could examine the matrix in great detail, either in my own hands or from the book itself. And failing that, I know there are many Magisters in the Order that have an interest and specialization of some of the older spells of the olden days. You could call them, ask for assistance," Argrave suggested, waving his hand upwards with a smile.

Get in line, or I'll talk to your manager, Argrave thought, half-hoping he could escalate things.

All three of the others looked contented by Argrave's answer, each looking to the cold-eyed man waiting for his opinion. He bit his lips for a few second, then nodded.

"Everything seems to be in order," he concluded.

Argrave nodded politely. "I thought so as well."

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"The old always have to trample on the young," ranted Argrave indignantly to Anneliese. "Should have seen his face when he read out that I was twenty. I'm sure the guy arranged some harder questions just for me. I'm supposed to be the bastard, not him." Argrave sighed and shook his head. "Whatever. Just have to wait for the conclave's assessment."

"Mine went well," Anneliese noted. "The test was fun. It was interesting to see how much I know put to the test. The extra requirements as an Honorary Wizard demanded I learn some of this Order's history."

Argrave nodded. "I'm glad for you. But now... we have to make arrangements for the meeting." Argrave pulled down the paper that Elias had given him of people that agreed to meet. "Hegazar... and Vera." He looked to Anneliese. "Ever known some couple that broke up and got back together dozens of times, like... like there was something they both hated and loved about each other in equal measure?"

Anneliese frowned. "No," she shook her head.

“Me neither,” Argrave looked back. “We will soon, though. These are our lucky opportunists. Two real pieces of work, feeding off each other like vampires in their ascent to the top... they’ve screwed each other in many ways countless times, some of these acts incredibly cruel, some of them... well, pleasant, I imagine.”

Anneliese stared down at the papers with a complex expression.

“What?” he asked her.

“I am starting to question if Elias might have been right. Courting such a tempestuous relationship...” she trailed off.

“No, no, trust me,” Argrave soothed. “All the other options we have will skin us and leave us out to dry. Only by having two opposing forces can we get through this.”

“Also means we might just get crushed between their quarrel,” Anneliese pointed out.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 223: Amour Fou

A lean man of above-average height wearing gray robes opened the door and walked inside. He was bald, though with sharp handsome features that seemed to have an indelible grin. This was not, despite appearances, Magister Hegazar. Instead, Argrave spotted a dim gray silhouette just behind. That would be the man himself.

“Hello, Magister Hegazar,” Argrave greeted, his legs crossed as he waited casually atop a couch. One of his arms rested across the back of the couch just behind Anneliese. Galamon stood behind, arms crossed before him as the ever-diligent guard.

Magister Hegazar was an S-rank mage whose A-rank ascension was closely linked with illusion magic. He was one of few Magisters in the Order to specialize in that branch of magic. The human figure Argrave saw—the bald, handsome man—was a constantly projected illusion. The silhouette was where Hegazar’s body truly was. Argrave suspected the only reason he able to glimpse even a hint of Hegazar’s true form was because of Garm’s eyes.

“Well... if it isn’t our Order’s resident Kinslaying Serpent, Argrave,” Hegazar greeted, his voice husky and deep. It had a certain intonation that dripped with amusement and cynicism. “My, I feel half a child again confronted by so many giants. My neck may hurt by the end of the conversation, craning it to look up at you.”

“Well, you are the true senior here, head and shoulder above us all,” Argrave answered at once, almost excessively flatteringly. Hegazar had an ego rivalling any A-list actor—Argrave’s strategy was to act as though he was ceding control to him while still controlling the flow of the conversation.

“I’m very glad we could meet today,” Argrave continued, rising to his feet. “Please, have a seat.”

The door shut behind him, and the lock clicked a second later. “Mmm...” Hegazar’s illusory body gave a nod. “Took you a while to reach out. I was beginning to think you were stringing me along like an ugly, kindhearted girl you didn’t have the heart to say ‘no’ to.”

Hegazar stepped into the room, and though his illusory body took a seat in the couch opposite Argrave, his true body roamed about the room, examining things. He didn't ask about Anneliese or Galamon—he didn't seem to care.

"But I suspect you were rather busy trimming your nails, cutting your hair, getting yourself presentable for the big crowd forming outside this tower," Hegazar continued, voice projecting from his illusory body flawlessly. "Your pa must have a soft spot for you—he's gathered so many people that are screaming your name, waiting for the very moment you step out onto the stage."

Argrave laughed politely and sat back down, doing his best to keep his eyes away from the silhouette that wandered the room. "Fortunately for them, I'm not one to disappoint the people. I'd like to step onto the stage soon enough. But... stagecraft, any sort of art... it can be an expensive thing. Sometimes you need a patron. A sponsor."

"Ahhh," Hegazar's false body leaned forth very naturally, placing both elbows on its knees. As it did so, Hegazar's true form finally decided it had seen enough, and went to sit down where the illusory body already sat, lounging while the illusory form remained animate. "I see where I come in, I think. You've got production issues. Bit off more than you can chew, hmm?"

"Sometimes an opportunity's too good to pass up, even if you have to overextend a bit to seize it," Argrave said, putting his arm back behind Anneliese.

Argrave knew Anneliese well enough to tell immediately she was ill at ease when faced with Hegazar. It seemed that, despite his illusion, she could tell that the form sitting before them was not real flesh and blood.

"Mmhm," Hegazar leaned back, silhouette and illusion overlapping for but half a second. "Not to condescend, but these patrons, these sponsors—as much as you might be fooled into believing they throw money at half-baked ideas for the sake of throwing money, that's not the case. These fools with gold in their soles—they've got an agenda. Either they like the art, or they see a golden, glimmering treasure mound at the end of the tunnel."

Hegazar let the words hang for a few seconds. "As for liking the art, well... even if you spin it as something avant garde, the crown prince dying isn't something I care to hang on my wall. I don't know you. I won't stick my neck out. As for profit..." the illusory figure threw up its hands in a shrug. "Your pockets look a bit light to me. I certainly don't see any pile of riches in sight. All you've got, as I see it, is an angry father. I have enough fathers angry at me—I don't care to add another to that list. But..." Hegazar raised a finger up with both bodies. "Maybe I need to look at it with a different lens. Got anything to help me see, Kinslayer?"

Argrave kept a poker face, but he could not deny he disliked being called Kinslayer. The man had a magnetic way of speaking, and he felt very much swept along by Hegazar. The fact Argrave recognized that, though, probably meant he wasn't. And soon enough, the man would be cast off balance.

"Let me show the cards, then," Argrave nodded. "Back when the Order of the Rose fell, Vasquer issued a ban on exploring their fortresses, and obfuscated many of their locations," Argrave said.

"A history lesson? That's a poor start to a trade," Hegazar noted.

“...during that time,” Argrave continued undaunted, “Many of the valuable books degraded, rotted, got washed away, or were otherwise destroyed. And many of the locations, well... my dear old dad hoards those jealously, if he’s even got them. But the ban on exploration is up, and yours truly has the location of a cache of preserved books that’ll be a more-than-fitting replacement for the pile of riches you might want. And even if it isn’t... if you sell them, you can make your own treasure hoard, Magister.”

“Kinslayer...” Hegazar shook his head and clicked his tongue. “If I wanted sweet promises, I could pay some troubadour to sing me songs about all my virtues, or some fortune teller to tell me what magnificent things I might find on my doorstep.”

Argrave leaned forth and reached under his couch, pulling free a large white book. It was one of seven A-rank spells that Garm left behind, and one of the most valuable things in Argrave’s possession. He needed juicy bait to hook the biggest fish. He set it on the coffee table between him and Hegazar and slid it over. Rather than allowing the Magister to hold it, Argrave opened the book up.

“Well, if I’m a fortune teller, this is my crystal ball,” Argrave leaned back in the couch as the A-rank matrix took shape. “The A-rank spell [Full Bloodmoon]. It’s the last of a series of spells I’ve already studied, somewhat. A devastating A-rank spell of blood magic. After all, necromancy and blood magic... Order of the Rose specialties.”

A-rank spells were almost wholly removed from the confines of all previous ranks. To begin with, to become A-rank was to assimilate deeper with magic, make it part of one’s body. Rather than matrixes... these spells took root in the body, too. Rather than conjuring a matrix, the body itself served as a sort of conduit to mold the magic. What appeared from the book was so complex Argrave couldn’t even begin to comprehend it.

It appeared to entice Hegazar, though. His illusory body remained lounging in the chair, but the silhouette that betrayed his true body got off the chair, kneeling before the table and studying the matrix in great detail. It was very difficult for Argrave to act as though he saw nothing.

“Pretty as a painting...” marveled Hegazar. The silhouette reached out towards the book briefly, but the sound of a lock clicking echoed in the silent room. Hegazar’s true body came to attention at once, prepared to fight, while the illusory body merely turned its head backwards casually.

The door opened, and Durran hurtled in as though chased by something. Argrave smiled when he saw the woman step in after him. She had gray hair with orange, predatory eyes, and looked quite young. Argrave thought she was quite beautiful, but he felt no attraction to her. He knew what she was really like.

Once Vera entered the room, her eyes scanned the place calmly as she crossed her arms. Wrath set in when she saw Hegazar, and she began, “You. I should have kno—”

But then, she laid eyes upon Argrave, and upon the wide-open A-rank spellbook. It was confusion at first, then ponderance, and then a stirring curiosity, each running across her face as quickly and obviously as Argrave had ever seen.

“And what might this be?” Vera stepped deeper into the room, eyes fixed on the A-rank matrix.

At once, Hegazar stepped past Vera and shut the door behind her. She followed his true body with her eyes, evidently unaffected by the illusion.

"And what is this, Argrave? Some ploy by this old witch?" Hegazar asked, as off-balance as Argrave had hoped the suave Magister to be.

"It's a... damnit, Durran, what the hell? This wasn't..!" Argrave acted indignant, stirring.

Durran collapsed onto the couch just beside Argrave. "What?"

"You had the wrong time," Argrave whispered in show, rising to his feet in faux panic.

"What?" Durran asked, then shook his head. "To the blazes with that. You don't pay me enough to deal with these—"

Argrave quickly kicked Durran in the shin as though to silence him. Both Magisters watched this show of theirs. Argrave couldn't tell if they were convinced, but Vera was too focused on the matrix to care.

"This..." Vera leaned over. "This is Order of the Rose work. And this book..." she reached down. "Not Owl binding, that's for certain."

Though Hegazar's illusory form looked entirely unbothered, he could practically see the unease in the silhouette by the door. Eventually... the door's lock clicked shut once more, and Hegazar walked up beside the female Magister.

"So..." Vera rose up, looking between Argrave and Hegazar. "You two seemed to be enjoying yourself before I arrived."

Argrave rubbed his hands together as though nervous, and then sat down back where he was. "I was... making an offer to Hegazar."

"Yes, he was showing me this book, trying to sell it," Hegazar quickly explained. "Now, scurry on back to your spider's nest so the best of us can continue to have fun, Vera. You'll get your turn to bid."

Vera gave an angry smile. "I think I'd like to be here."

"It's a mistake you're here at all," Hegazar said. "Go, go. The Kinslayer will talk to you later."

Vera plopped down on the couch right atop Hegazar's illusory form as if in insult. Though the illusion contorted aside naturally as if dodging her, holes were poked in the spell for but a moment and Argrave saw the couch behind.

"Maybe... I should..." Argrave faked hesitation.

"You will tell me what is happening here," Vera stated. "You know it is poor form to offend a Magister, Argrave. Especially considering all you've already done... it would be most unwise to do so."

It was all Argrave could do not to smile.

Both of the people before him were conniving people likely to use and abuse him. Vera was incredibly vindictive and didn't care for anyone at all. Hegazar was all-around deceitful, more than willing to take

every advantage of someone and then toss them aside like a filled trash bag. Both would sell him out like no tomorrow once Argrave had paid up his side of the bargain.

They were like *all* of the Magisters that had agreed to meet Argrave. He was a kinslayer, a royal bastard—good, trustworthy people wouldn't engage with him on faith alone, it seemed. He was a pariah. Without Castro, there was no single reliable person he could call upon.

Together, though? They'd keep in each other in check. They'd be too busy fighting with themselves to care about Argrave. All he had to do was play this right. Self-interested people made poor friends... but if one can interest them, they're much easier to steer the right way. If Argrave couldn't, though... he might die twice as hard.

"Can't you see you're unwelcome, Vera? He squirms like a bug just looking at you, the poor child. You always did frighten young men. Probably because they can see you're some sort of parasitic worm made flesh and filled with low cunning," Hegazar said bitterly.

"Go on, Argrave," Vera urged.

"Well... alright," Argrave conceded. It was quite hard to act as though it was begrudgingly.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 224: Third Figure

In an area far away from the Tower of the Gray Owl, enough knights gathered to form a forest of horseflesh and steel-armored knights. Countless banners hung in the sky, swaying against the light winds of winter. Though the heraldry on each was varied and many, the most common colors were white and gold, and many flags were derivatives of the golden lion of House Parbon. At the head of this host, Margrave Reinhardt sat aback his prized warhorse. Evidently the white stallion had been recovered from Mateth after its theft.

Though stationary, the army did not look unprepared for battle. The men kept their disciplined warhorses at ease. Even more diligent were the countless mages in the party—they had to be, for a magical assault could occur far more silently than a charge of an army. Yet roaming warbands bearing the golden snakes of Vasquer roamed the plains, and none could be said to be truly at ease.

In the far distance, a party of over a dozen moved across the plains towards their party. A scout shouted, "Two A-rank! Three C-rank! Nine mundane!"

"At ease!" shouted the Margrave, his voice a great bellow beneath his gilded white great helm. He spurred his horse forward and proceeded, moving to meet the party that came. The A-rank mages were the men the Margrave had sent to guard his son.

As the two came nearer... Mina, Elias, Nikoletta, and Stain came into view, and the Margrave hastened his horse. The roaming warbands bearing the flag of Vasquer, though far from the host, took note of the detachment. The army prepared to cover the Margrave if he should come under attack.

"Son," the Margrave greeted in a shout, slowing his horse as the two came near. "You're alone."

Stain seemed to want to correct that very desperately, but he stayed silent. None of the others seemed to mind.

"I am," Elias nodded, making Stain all the more frustrated. "We have to talk, father. Who is present?"

The Margrave nodded. "A great deal of those supporting us. Come," he waved his hands, then pulled on his horse's reins.

The sound of horns blew across the plains. The Margrave whipped his head about, watching the movement of the enemy hosts scattered about the plains. Once one of the other parties heard the horn sounding, it was echoed to the next party, and like this, communication was quickly established.

The horses grew uneasy by the sound of the horn as though it told of an ill omen. The lesser, poorly trained warhorses stirred, yet most remained firm. The Margrave clenched the reins tight in his white gauntlets, waiting and watching.

Yet the enemy parties moved out and away, converging towards several designated points. It seemed they were regrouping, yet not attacking. The Margrave nodded. "Come, Elias, everyone."

#####

Elias stepped inside his father's war tent, legs still stiff from such a long and tense ride on horseback. The armies could not proceed past certain geographical points without technically breaking the clause of non-interference in Order business, yet there was still an instinctual fear when seeing the roaming bands of warriors willing and able to slaughter Elias outside that boundary on his trek here.

Bizarrely enough, that fear was not abated being in his father's command tent. The multitude of powerful people present put Elias on edge—his father, Duke Enrico of Monticci, Duke Marauch of Elbraille, Count Delbraun of Jast, and Duke Sumner of Dedsworth from the southeast. There were many other powerful lords that had lent their name to the aid of House Parbon, and all stood before a long rectangular table.

Elias had told his father Reinhardt what Argrave had said. He had expected to try desperately to persuade the Margrave to accept Argrave, poor though his conditions might be. But then, his father did something that defied his expectation—he asked Elias to deliver the news to all the gathered leaders himself.

Margrave Reinhardt stepped past Elias. Everyone followed Reinhardt with their gazes as he walked—it was clear enough just by that alone that he was the leader. Reinhardt walked around the table, coming to stand at the head of the rectangular table. Elias stood opposite him, and the rest of his companions from the Tower came to stand beside or behind him.

"My lords," Reinhardt said loudly and clearly, his commander's voice naturally drawing the attention of what few individuals did not already look at him. "My son has returned from the Tower of the Gray Owl alongside his three companions, having spoken to Argrave."

All four—Stain, Elias, Nikoletta, and Mina—came to stand side-by-side, directly opposite the Margrave. Mina seemed discomforted, for she had no relatives present whatsoever. She was not so out of place as Stain, who desperately tried to ignore the fact his brother, who had disinherited him, stood just beside the Margrave.

Realizing that none would speak first, Elias answered his father. “Indeed, we spoke to Argrave. The rumor of him slaying his brother is categorically true. It was the culmination of a feud near a decade old—Induen slayed Argrave’s mother in cold blood before his eyes and had been abusing him for years.”

“You speak like his advocate,” Duke Sumner of Dedsworth noted.

Duke Sumner was a mage, and a powerful one—his family of Dedsworth, like Count Delbraun of Jast’s, were traditionally mages. His A-rank ascension was not particularly out of the norm, and so he seemed rather plain—a finely-cut brown beard leavened with wavy hair. He looked as young as Elias, though with a certain maturity about him that would make people second-guess.

Margrave Reinhardt leaned over the table, and its wooden frame creaked beneath the weight of his body and armor. “I sent Elias to find and retrieve Argrave to introduce all of him to you,” Reinhardt disclosed. “I wished to consider him our primary claimant against Vasquer.”

Though it was no news at all to Elias, it sent a ripple through the assembled nobles at once. Duke Sumner said, “This was never a war of disputed heritage, Margrave Reinhardt. Felipe has the blood of Vasquer in him, strong as anyone, and his sons each and all inherited it without question. They are in the line of succession, indisputably. Even then, Argrave is a bastard... and now, a kinslayer, regardless of his reasoning.”

The words were spoken neutrally, but Sumner’s points grew some support from the people that opposed the notion of a bastard.

“Felipe and all of his trueborn issue... there is something wrong with them, something corrupt,” Reinhardt said at once. “I firmly believe, based on their actions and their words, that they have strayed from the righteous path. They have deviated from the path of a king. Felipe, Orion, Levin... they are not fit. And I would not have the kingdom descend into petty states feuding over the throne when we are finished. We need a claimant.”

“What about Princess Elenore?” Duke Marauch suggested innocently.

Many present expressed disapproval. Count Delbraun spoke, his voice cutting through the noise to say, “The blind cannot see the path ahead; how will they lead us down it? I will admit she was a bright, vivacious youth... but Felipe cruelly robbed her of all potential and keeps her locked within a greenhouse in the capital. A ruler cannot wholly rely on their servants—any council would have complete control over her. Besides, a woman has never ruled over Vasquer.”

Stain glowered at the ashen-haired, orange-eyed man that was his brother. Delbraun did not deign to even acknowledge Stain’s presence.

“My lords,” Elias said, voice mustering the same bit of authoritativeness as his father’s. “During the time spent at the Tower, I dedicated much of my time to surveying Argrave’s character. All four of us did,” he waved between the four of them that had been present. “My escorts, too, bore witness to his character. I can guarantee each and all of us will attest that having Argrave on the throne after the war is finished is our best option—indeed, perhaps the only option that can preserve the centuries-old monarchy of Vasquer.”

Those words drew the attention of all, and Elias tried to press pass his nervousness. “Duke Enrico—please describe the events of Mateth.”

Duke Enrico shifted in surprise being called upon, running a hand through his blue hair to gather himself. “Well... after informing me of the coming invasion and enabling me to prepare defenses, Argrave aided in the defense of a coastal village. After negotiating a parley with the snow elf commander, he sailed with them to their homeland of...” the Duke trailed off, forgetting.

“Veiden,” Mina cut in, crossing her arms.

“Veiden,” Enrico nodded. “While there... he negotiated with the leader of these snow elves. Without his intervention, and without our own good fortune, Mateth and the entire coastline would be occupied by them. Their naval forces were vastly superior to our house’s prized fleet, and their warriors very nearly seized the city. Argrave was the one to secure peace.”

“But you have an interest in making him look good,” a countess swearing fealty to Duke Sumner noted. “After all, Argrave is supposedly betrothed to Nikoletta.”

Enrico lowered his head, but Nikoletta rebutted, “Argrave and I are not betrothed, nor will we be.”

The Duke shot a surprised glance at his daughter.

“I see,” said Duke Sumner. He seemed ambivalent about the news, but others seemed eager—a bachelor claimant to the throne? An enticing proposition, it would seem.

“He is betrothed to a snow elf,” Elias said, tearing the bandage off right away. He knew it would be pragmatic to exclude this detail, but he would not lie to people fighting a war on their behalf. “A B-rank mage by the name of Anneliese.”

One noble present laughed aloud, turning away from the table. Many more sour looks passed through the assembled nobles.

“Following the invasion at Mateth, Argrave headed to the northwest,” Elias continued, hoping to redirect the conversation quickly.

“Hold a moment,” Baron Abraham, vassal to the Margrave, interrupted. He had a slight history with Argrave, having met him at Jast. “Why is this betrothal being glossed over? That is a serious issue, to take one of elven blood to wife. All of this is an ill omen. It speaks of strong ties to foreign powers!”

Elias shifted on his feet. “This was a point I brought up to Argrave. It’s not an issue he will compromise on.”

“Anneliese is a genius,” Nikoletta said plainly. “She understands magic and people like no other I have met. The Order has accepted her as an Honorary Wizard, and she was applying to join the Order officially as a High Wizard. This is not a loss, this betrothal—it is a tremendous boon.”

“Forget the woman,” Delbraun said. “Enrico himself claimed that this war was lost before Argrave brought it to a halt. A bride of their people? That hints at collusion, of close ties—who can say where Argrave’s loyalty lies? He travels with two of these snow elves!”

Even those that had seemed positively predisposed to the idea of Argrave being their claimant agreed with that statement vigorously.

“Perhaps he has an arrangement to occur after the war is finished,” someone suggested. “When all our armies are weakened and battered, perhaps this invasion shall resume.”

Stain noticed the way things were trending and said loudly, “This is all baseless, unreasonable assumption. The elves were winning—if he were their allies, he would not have gotten peace, not have returned to Vasquer our allies.”

Duke Sumner shrugged. “Who knows what they’ve offered him? Land, vengeance...”

Elias planted his fists firmly against the table. “Could anything compare to a kingship? We lose the plot, my lords! We speak of Argrave and his character. I can assure you on the name of House Parbon, nothing material would motivate him.”

Elias’ words were enough to stifle further discussion as he used his House’s name behind those words. It couldn’t stifle the near undisguised contempt for Argrave’s foreign company.

“This man you lords so quickly deem a traitor travelled to the northwest, where he endangered his own life combatting this terrifying plague. All of us have experienced this fell illness firsthand—some of us, more than others,” Elias gestured vaguely to his eye. “Argrave knew the danger it posed. He took action. Ultimately, he and Orion put an end to it.”

“Put an end to it?” Count Delbraun repeated. “What does this mean?”

Elias swallowed. “Most present might agree on this point—the plague, this waxpox, it was unusual in many ways.” Elias rubbed at his cheek. “This mark, here—it was spreading vigorously across my body before stopping suddenly. The fact is, this plague was an assault from the northwest of a mystical nature—and Argrave, he learned of it and ended it with Orion’s aid.”

The nobles were a mixture of those impressed and those in disbelief.

“You can talk to people who will personally confirm that—refugees from the north. Argrave put an end to it with Orion’s help, I swear it,” Mina stepped forth, saying so boldly. “He had me stall Induen at my father’s keep to ensure he was not interrupted during this process.”

Duke Sumner leaned over the table. “But all of this—it’s secondhand reports. Where is Argrave? We must see him, speak to him, judge him and this... snow elf with our own eyes.”

Elias had been wondering how to phrase Argrave’s refusal the whole while. “Argrave agreed to act as our claimant. However... he believes we are insufficient to fight against Vasquer, weakened from the plague as we all are. He plans to bring his own army to the war.”

“Then there it is!” Duke Sumner gestured towards Elias. “If that is not an admission of ties to foreign lands, what is?”

Though the assembled nobles rose in support, Margrave Reinhardt spoke for the first time in a while, silencing the burgeoning uproar. “What do you mean, Elias? What army?”

“Beyond saying there were untapped forces in the north, he refused to divulge more. In my personal opinion, I think he intends to call upon allies in the north to betray Vasquer, and feared the king catching wind of his scheme,” Elias said bluntly. “Argrave feared informants, foremost among them being the Bat.”

Evidently, many present had heard that name, for the excuse brought a strange silence with it. That name held weight. It seemed everyone had, directly or indirectly, associated with the Bat.

Stain contributed, “Informants led Induen to Argrave, after all. Induen wanted to harass him, kill his betrothed. He’s reasonable to be paranoid.”

Elias wasn’t sure if that was a lie or not, but he let it slide because it supported their argument.

“You learned nothing of this army he mentioned while he was there?” Duke Sumner held his hands out. “We cannot risk involving a third power in our war. We cannot back a claimant that might tear this realm asunder by involving a conqueror. Do you know nothing of his ties?”

Elias hesitantly said, “Argrave was very cautious.”

“Margrave Reinhardt...” Duke Sumner turned to him. “I support the idea that Vasquer needs to be overthrown. But such an uncertain variable, such a wild force... can we support it?”

Reinhardt stood up straight and asked, “If Argrave did bring a third army, could we even stop that?”

That set a grim tone to the conversation.

Delbraun suggested softly, “We might negotiate an armistice with Vasquer to fight the—”

“Do you think Vasquer would accept that?” Reinhardt roared. “Felipe would demand all of our heads as the terms for the peace. He would take more than that—he’d make an example of all the most prominent of us. And even beyond that, the people would continue to suffer beneath the tyrannical reign of this generation’s Vasquers.”

Duke Sumner shook his head. “You do not know that.”

“We have no option, Sumner,” Enrico said insistently.

“We do,” Sumner shook his head. “We continue as we were—rebels against tyranny, not rebels supporting a claimant.”

“Then we lose,” Reinhardt stated. “All the neutral lords of the south will stay neutral with no claimant. The undecided lords of the north will eventually support the winning side. All of us—each and all—will be stripped of our lands, our families butchered.”

Sumner stepped away from his spot, moving towards Reinhardt. “Our end might be the same if Argrave brings an army of foreigners to this war to fish in these troubled waters.”

The two stared at each other, a battle of ideas. The room was just as undecided.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 225: The Troupe Departs

Anneliese and Argrave raised up their new golden badges and clinked them together. It let out a pleasant metallic sound. Durran and Galamon watched on from another part of the room, both relatively idle.

“High Wizard Anneliese. Sounds nice. A shame it’s a temporary title,” Argrave’s gaze jumped between the golden owl badges in her hand and Anneliese’s amber eyes.

She tilted her head. “How do you mean?”

Argrave shrugged. “Well, soon enough, you’ll be a Magister.”

Anneliese shook her head with an amused smile, but gradually her expression became serious. “Are you sure of travelling with Vera and Hegazar?”

Argrave stowed away the golden badge. “Bit too late to get out of this gambit now, no?”

“We could just stay in the Tower,” Durran posited.

Argrave looked to him. “If I was going to do that, I would have done it all those months ago. Then Anneliese would be conquering Berendar, you’d probably be dead, and Galamon would be... I’m not sure. He’d be fine, I guess. Meanwhile, everyone else would be dying, and then I’d die, too, once Gerechtigkeits comes.”

“Fortunate thing, then,” Galamon spoke. Argrave knew he hated speculation, and likely wished to change the subject.

“Hegazar makes me uneasy,” Anneliese stated. “His emotions... are not human, I think.”

Argrave pointed to her. “You can’t see his real body. Even I can only see a vague silhouette of his form. You’re not seeing emotions at all—it’s illusion magic.”

“You have said that time and time again,” Anneliese nodded. “Never mind that. Even Vera sees us only as tools, means to an end. Can we not travel with better people?”

Argrave sighed. “If they existed... sure, I could. But Castro is busy keeping his apprentice alive. Beyond that, appeals to empathy won’t work for any Magister willing to meet us—the only ones we can get are the ones that are self-interested. At the very least, Vera and Hegazar are consistent in their morals... or lack thereof. It makes them predictable. This isn’t another Orion, Anneliese—I have some assurances. So long as these two vipers think I’ve got something interesting in this head of mine, they’ll keep me alive.”

“The rest of us? Tough luck, I assume,” Durran quipped.

Argrave vowed, “I’ll die long before any of you.”

Anneliese looked ill at ease regarding that vow, but Durran joked, “Guess I have to keep you alive for a long while then, for my own sake if nothing else.”

#####

Argrave rode the central elevator of mystic stone slabs to a certain floor, then disembarked. All of his companions were present, plus another individual—the ashen-haired Magister, Vera.

"You came early," she noted politely.

"I was already up. Don't like waiting around," Argrave explained, stepping off and making room so as not to crowd things for other people.

Vera crossed her arms. "You will find it is a wasted effort. Hegazar is always late."

Argrave nodded without committing any words to her claim.

Vera stalked up to him languidly. "But it is a good thing. I get you to myself." She grabbed his shoulder, standing on the tips of her toes to whisper into his ear, "Hegazar put men out to watch where we head. I caught wind of it this morning. But don't worry," she said soothingly. "I have my own people watching his. None will see us leave, as you wanted."

Argrave pulled away. "That's good," he thanked her. If Vera had wanted to talk in private, she might have conjured a ward, but instead she did that. He wasn't particularly fond of it, but it'd be best to keep that to himself.

It seemed that the game had already begun. Vera and Hegazar would turn him into a battlefield of manipulation. Vera was subtler than the egomaniac that was Hegazar, but no less spiteful or dangerous. She was the aunt of Count Delbraun of Jast, with the gray-haired, orange-eyed look prominent in the House, but her familial ties had little bearing on her position. One didn't become a Magister without a certain temperament.

Argrave walked to the wall beside Galamon, where he slumped down until he sat on the floor. As he examined his beautiful new golden badge denoting his status as a High Wizard, his Brumesingers came out. Their fur was growing a bit darker, and they were growing a bit bigger. Now, their shade of gray nearly qualified as black. They had been ever-able protectors.

"Anything new?" Argrave inquired of Galamon to pass the time.

"All quiet," Galamon informed him.

Argrave took a deep, nervous breath. This might be the last time they had of relative safety. They'd have to dance a constant game around these two narcissistic Magisters... but there was still no better security than their presence. One an unparalleled illusionist, the other a master of elemental magic—Argrave could infiltrate anywhere with their aid. It would be a week before Argrave recovered his Blessing of Supersession—not the most ideal situation, but Argrave only had to keep an eye on the two.

In a few minutes, Tower Master Castro came down the elevator. His eyes scanned his party members. Argrave was briefly worried about Galamon's vampirism being exposed given how omniscient the Tower Master seemed at times, but nothing unusual occurred.

"Hegazar is not here?" Castro questioned.

"He's late," Vera informed him.

"No matter," Castro shook his head. "You two—come forth," he directed Galamon and Durran. When they did, he quickly pressed something against their chest. An owl of teal light took shape on both their bodies.

“Been a while since I’ve used these. Temporary passes,” Castro explained. “They’ll dissipate the moment you leave the Tower. So, if you need anything...”

“We’re settled,” Argrave informed him. “Left a good chunk of books for you—druidic magic. I’ll get you the rest in time, as I promised,” he nodded towards Castro.

Unlike before, Castro did not seem so perturbed by this fact—perhaps it was because Argrave had shown he wasn’t lying, or maybe Castro acknowledged Argrave might need them most, fighting against Gerechtigkeits as he was.

Regardless, his thoughts could not be explored long. Someone came into view in the elevator—Hegazar, with his illusory and real self overlapping.

Anneliese, without the benefit of Garm’s eyes, could not see past Hegazar’s illusion. She had known something was amiss nonetheless—she said that Hegazar’s body was somehow wrong, that it projected emotions in an inhuman way. The man made her deeply uneasy because of this. It was like a sense that Anneliese had all her life simply vanished when applied to this man.

“Well, if it isn’t the old man. He deigns to come down from his silk-carpeted chambers for little old Kinslayer? Such a rich respect for the newer generation—very admirable. Or maybe you simply have a penchant for stepping on the snake, Master Castro,” Hegazar said smoothly. “Shame about the drapes,” his eyes went to Vera.

“Keep your eyes off me,” she snapped at him.

Hegazar stepped off the elevator. “My eyes are in my head, fortunately. It’s my gaze that’s on you. I can see why someone slow-witted like yourself—”

“Magisters,” Castro cut in, putting power into his voice. “We should not waste time.”

“Sure, sure,” Hegazar nodded.

Argrave said, “Once again, I appreciate this, Castro.”

Castro nodded. “Be sure it has meaning. I hope we have time to discuss what you brought me at a later date.”

Argrave nodded. “You will.”

After a brief scan of his companions, Galamon handed Argrave his backpack, and he hefted it on. They all prepared to leave. One large stone tablet descended to accommodate all of them, and they stood on it, waiting.

“You know, Kinslayer,” Hegazar said as they ascended. “Be careful. Some people, they smile, flutter their eyes, show a little leg... but don’t let it distract you. It’s bad enough that Vera’s forced her way onto this convoy—trusting her would be the last mistake you make.”

“Hegazar sometimes imitates the forms of loved ones to deceive people into sex,” Vera said succinctly. “He’s like an incub—”

“See? All she can say is lies,” he interrupted her. “The last thing I’d need is to imitate another’s form—my own body is good enough.”

The elevator felt dreadfully long, Hegazar and Vera trading insults back and forth indiscriminately. Most of what each said was lies—Anneliese confirmed that they were lying constantly with cues to Argrave, though after a time he got the message and gave her leave to relax.

“Argrave,” Castro said. “My apprentice wanted to speak with you before you left.”

Being called aside without much warning, Argrave furrowed his brows. “Why?”

“The prodigal, faceless apprentice?” Hegazar noted. “Bring him out, won’t you?”

“Go to the balcony, Hegazar. And know I keep inventory,” Castro warned him blatantly. “Are you coming, Argrave?”

Though his question of ‘why’ had not been answered, Argrave nodded and followed along.

“I’ll set up the illusions while you’re away, Kinslayer,” Hegazar called out. “No one will know you’ve left, not for days... the things I do for my friends, why, sometimes I make myself proud...”

Castro led Argrave away as the rest of Argrave’s party made their way to the balcony, ready to move.

“If this Gerechtigheit proves to be real, I’ll lend you my aid,” Castro promised. “Unconditionally, at that. This isn’t a matter of politics—this is a natural disaster, it would seem.”

“You brought me aside to tell me that?” Argrave questioned. “I already knew you would. I know you well.”

“...no, I didn’t bring you here to tell you that,” Castro said, obviously off-balance from Argrave’s assertion. “Ingo does want to speak to you.”

Though surprised, Argrave was led into a secluded place in the top floor before he could ponder too deeply. There, he saw a young man hunched over a desk, studying. Argrave dared to examine his magic supply... but it was rather ordinary.

“Ingo,” Castro called out gently. “I brought him.”

Ingo turned. He had light, almost baby-blue hair and eyes, which greatly enhanced the image of naivete the young man projected.

“Hello,” Ingo greeted. “Are you Argrave of Vasquer?”

“Just Argrave, but yes,” he nodded, curious as to why Ingo wanted to see him.

“Oh... um, sorry. Or... yes, I’m sorry,” Ingo tripped over his words. “And I’m... I heard you had to kill your own brother. I’m sorry. That must have been very hard.”

Argrave couldn’t deny the words caught him off guard. *Was it hard?* Argrave wondered. He felt his scale of difficulty had gone a little haywire in the past months.

“After all, he was still family,” Ingo continued. “Despite what he might have done, I know that it can... carry weight.”

Oh, Argrave realized. He means emotionally hard.

"I'm fine," Argrave assured him.

"Are you?" Ingo asked. "Oh—erm, I shouldn't imply you're lying. I'm sorry." Ingo shook his head vigorously. "I'm terrible at... well, I wanted to meet you. Castro says we're the same age, and... he also said your thesis was genius, so I thought... well, a new disciple might... you might... Castro mentioned something about you and being a disciple..."

As Argrave looked at the Master pointedly, Castro cleared his throat. "I think you misheard, Ingo."

"Did I?" Ingo asked disbelievingly. "I'm sorry. I'm getting off the point. I just... I saw something. Something important, and I had to tell you."

Argrave frowned and stepped closer. "Something related to your Blessing?"

Castro tensed. Few knew of the nature of Ingo's affliction—his body constantly ate itself, degrading into nothingness, and in return Ingo received visions. He could not see the future, but he saw important things occurring around the world at present. These visions were often delivered to him in vague imagery.

Ingo nodded. "Yes. All I can say... all I can say is this. The Bat cannot hear everything, especially not that hiding in its own fur."

Argrave's face tensed. "Was there anything else?"

"No," Ingo shook his head.

Argrave took a deep breath, then looked behind him. "Thank you, Ingo. That's very helpful. I'll be careful."

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When Argrave stepped out onto the balcony, Vera stood atop a gargantuan bird formed of wind. It had saddles on its back, enough to accommodate even sixteen people, let alone the six their party actually was.

"Took you long enough," Hegazar noted, lounging against the railing. "Everything is prepared for the journey. Are you prepared to step out onto the stage, start this show?"

Argrave nodded confidently. "Very much so."

"This spell can only travel in one direction, and we'll need to jump off at the end," Vera called out.

"Perhaps it's time you disclose where we're headed."

"North-northwest," Argrave said at once.

"But that's..." Hegazar noted. "Is this some regret and remorse I hear? You planning to turn yourself in to your old dad? That's almost directly to Dirracha," Hegazar said incredulously.

“No,” Argrave shook his head. “I told you this would be worth your time. The biggest of the Order of the Rose living fortresses... they were near the capital. So, let’s go. Please, cloak our advance, Magister Hegazar.”