

Argrave lowered down the wooden-framed glass display case containing the bronze set of jewelry he'd come to get. It settled delicately on the uneven stone of the heart chamber, the pieces within staying fixed atop a velvet pillow. Everyone else was similarly hauling things, setting them in uneven heaps. It was impossible to tell the value of much of what they saw—neither Vera nor Hegazar were experts at discerning inscriptions from the Order of the Rose.

"It seems the thing we really ought to be discussing is logistics..." Hegazar mused. His body was unused to carrying things and he did not deign to use magic for the task, so his haul was relatively light. "Even if things are divided, how are we to carry this back?"

Vera set down her box, and then said without much care, "A local caravan, perhaps. I have enough to pay for my own passage. If you can't pay similarly... I could be persuaded to help you if you part with more of this gear. We would return together. This equipment is valuable enough to warrant our personal escort, I should think."

"Of course I—" Hegazar began, but then stopped and shook his head. "We waste time. Let's get back."

Once Vera and Hegazar turned back, Argrave covertly cast a spell. He could acutely feel his Brumesingers rush to obey his command. The two Magisters were still cautious and comfortably slow, and Argrave was glad of this fact. Considering Anneliese was linked to Argrave's druidic bond through the B-rank spell [Progenitor], she would surely know what he was doing, and be amply prepared to act in kind.

Plotting against the paranoid was a mountainous task. But paranoia had a negative reputation for a reason—it was something that could prey upon the one who had it just as easily as it could help them. Anneliese and Argrave had nothing monumental in mind. Instead, something simple and easily done worked best.

Piece by piece, Argrave's Brumesingers caused slight disturbances. The limitations of his spell [Pack Leader] by which he bonded the creatures to himself disabled direct control, but he could have them aimlessly move the treasures in the vault about easily enough. Anneliese's Starsparrow, however, took things here and there. Whenever she had the opportunity, bits would disappear—the bird was strong enough to spirit away enchanted jewelry, small daggers, even whole books.

It was subtle. But subtleties were best noticed by paranoid people like the two Magisters with them. Argrave was certain that both noticed the small discrepancies—Vera's face tightened in suspicion at objects displaced by the Brumesingers, and Hegazar kept a detailed account of all that was there.

Their small changes were like infected wounds slowly beginning to fester. None of it was enough to bear mentioning—they hauled so much treasure out of the vault that to mention a book having gone missing or a ring disappeared would make the other appear mad. Nonetheless, Argrave knew that he drilled at their paranoia ever so steadily, inflaming this instinct and making them eager to take action.

When they arrived back at the vault for the umpteenth time... Argrave had a little scene prepared for the both of them. It was only a southron elf warrior conjured of mist, appearing for nothing more than

half a second at the entrance to the vault. Yet the conjurations of the Brumesingers always had a startling realism to them until they were struck... and the effect was obvious.

"What in the world was that?" Vera said quietly, body tensing. She put some distance between herself and Hegazar.

"Looked to be a person," Hegazar turned to Argrave. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you? You, the only person who knew where this place was beforehand? You, the only one who might've prepared men here beforehand?"

Argrave raised his hands up in innocent surrender. "I didn't do anything!" he protested indignantly.

"No illusion can fool my eyes. I made sure of that, knowing I would be travelling with this one," Vera said angrily, eyes fixed on Hegazar. "That was a man. Walking, talking, breathing."

"I saw it just as well as you," Durran contributed. "Didn't look human."

Hegazar and Vera both scanned Argrave's features, looking for an answer written on his face. Argrave felt like a roulette ball was spinning, and he'd put all his chips on black.

"There's one entrance, we all made sure of that." Hegazar concluded with his grim voice. "We've seen them. They can't escape. I trust you won't change that story of yours, Argrave, once we catch this person. Elsewise... well, their fate will be a kindness compared to yours."

Vera eyed Hegazar's true body. She seemed to be questioning if he was truly sincere. When he turned and started walking towards the vault with a quick, almost furious stride, she seemed to be a little more believing. Hegazar passed by into the vault, and Argrave's heart started to beat like a whole marching band disturbed his chest.

Argrave stepped closer. By this point, Vera found Hegazar's haste alarming, and hurried after him like there was some party she'd be missing. She hesitated at the vault's entrance, and Argrave pressed up just behind her. A dense mist lay beyond, and Argrave saw Hegazar entering it confidently. Vera inched her way in cautiously, and Argrave stepped with her. Then, he stretched his legs backwards and hastily backstepped.

As though timed, the doors started to shut right before Argrave's nose, the Brumesingers appearing out of the mist as they did. In short order, the titanic walls of metal slammed together, enchantments shimmering as if sentencing those within. The sight made him stumble with a revelatory realization, and Argrave held both hands to the metal door. After a moment, he started to laugh and turned around.

"Hahaha!" Argrave shouted, throwing his fist up. "Holy... god damn," he stepped forth to Anneliese, who opened her eyes just as a golden bird perched on her shoulder. They both had the same idea—a hearty embrace, with a sweet and deep kiss of satisfaction following.

"How sweet," a husky voice entered Argrave's ears.

At once, it felt like a maggot had wormed its way into Argrave's throat. He broke away from Anneliese and stared just beside him from whence the voice came. A bald man leaned his shoulder against the metal vault door, a wide grin on his face.

“Maybe my lecturing about love being a burden was a bit misguided. Very nice attempt. You certainly fooled Vera like nothing else, though I helped you out at the end there... went along with your scheme, got her inside the vault before quickly stepping out, just like you. How satisfying, seeing her locked away like she belongs,” the Magister took slow, steady steps forth. “But come now. Illusions are my domain. You think I wouldn’t be able to notice you could see my true body, Argrave? It’s hard to act like you *can’t* see something, Kinslayer, least of all for days on end.

“You think I wouldn’t do my research before I travelled with you?” Hegazar continued, gloating. “You think I wouldn’t know you’d contributed druidic magic to the Tower, that you might have... other actors, those animals of yours? A pretty bird, some little foxes... it’s certainly sly. The theatric with your snow elf retainer—amazing! I can see why Vera missed it. She used her people in the Tower to suppress mine, but I spent my time researching you. She’s used to betraying, but not being betrayed. I am, though.” Hegazar shook his head. “Commendable. But all that’s done, now.”

Argrave braced himself, waiting for the next move of the S-rank spellcaster.

Though Argrave was bracing to meet his maker, Anneliese put her hand on his shoulder. “You wear no illusion anymore, do you?” Anneliese inquired, with a voice that did not sound afraid at all.

Hegazar held his arms out. “In the flesh, but just as handsome. Maybe even more so,” the Magister mused.

The fact that nothing was happening made Argrave come alive once more. Discrepancies aligned, and he raced to a hypothesis. That hypothesis led Argrave to will himself to see the magic within the Magister. And what he saw within Hegazar was a great mass of magic, far beyond Argrave or Anneliese’s.

Hegazar’s magic was far beyond them... but also greatly diminished.

Veritable gears and cogs fell into place like a clocktower being set into motion in Argrave’s head. Hegazar had realized Argrave was seeing through his illusion magic... yet the Magister wasn’t certain how. As such, to guarantee he’d be able to fool Argrave, Hegazar cast illusion magic of a much higher grade than the one he commonly utilized. Apparently, even Master Castro had needed a few days to recover his magic after using an S-rank spell to use another, and that was a centuries-old spellcaster.

And now... could they kill Hegazar? Argrave didn’t have the Blessing of Supersession. He didn’t see the necessity to regain it—he never thought he’d stand a chance against either of these two with or without it, so he decided to rely solely on his abilities to manipulate them. With four of them—one C-rank mage, two B-rank mages, and Galamon with Ebonice and his Giantkillers... could they fight and win?

Maybe, Argrave came to the mental conclusion. Hegazar heard that we killed Induen, plus his four B-rank royal guards. I’m sure he’s thinking the same thing—maybe he can kill us. But with a vault full of valuables behind us, and a unified party of unknown strength... he wants to look for another solution. A cleaner solution. He’s gambled a lot to get a higher position in this negotiation. If I give it to him...

“So... partner,” Argrave straightened his back and stood up tall, yet did not relax. “That vault back there—it’s got an angry S-rank mage inside. I think I can help you with a little pest removal. I’d just need a little bit of your help, a little charity.”

Durran and Galamon, perhaps not coming to the same conclusion Argrave had, looked at him as though he was mad. Hegazar put both hands behind his back.

“Charity?” Hegazar repeated vaguely, neither affirming nor denying Argrave’s beginning to an offer.

“How’s this?” Argrave stepped forward, ahead of everyone. Galamon attempted to stop Argrave, but he shrugged the elf’s arm off. “You, me, everybody here—we collaborate to move this fortress to a different location. An old, nearly abandoned sewer system in Dirracha. I mentioned this idea to you earlier. It’ll enable you to bring your people here, get things in order to open the old vault, meet Vera once more with a more powerful party... and get everything within.”

“Why not let her suffocate?” Hegazar said coldly. “Swoop in after...”

“I don’t assume she’ll let that happen,” Argrave shook his head slowly. “She’ll play it calm for now, but if things get desperate in there? Expect her to test this vault’s limits. It’s a little less unbreakable from the inside. Even if she can’t get out, you can be sure she’ll destroy everything in spite.”

Hegazar nodded slowly. “A fair point.”

“I only hope you’ll be willing to part with something. A little finder’s fee. Please give me everything we hauled out into the heart chamber,” Argrave held his hand out. “There’s a lot of stuff left in that vault. Definitely a lot more than half—a lot better than things were likely to split up.”

“Probably seventy-five percent left in the vault—all of it, yours,” Durran contributed, going all-in with Argrave on this gamble.

Hegazar stared up at Argrave with his cold, dark eyes. “You want the things in the cages, too?”

Argrave stepped away as though thinking, but he was really looking to Anneliese for guidance. She gave the slightest nod. Argrave turned back.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“How, dare I ask, did you come up with this offer?” Hegazar tilted his head.

Galamon’s hand hovered near the Ebonice axe on his belt, prepared for anything. Argrave wavered slightly before the tense situation. He swallowed, steeling his resolve. “It’s an offer I thought would make everyone happy. Except Vera, of course. Everything goes back to the way it was. Everyone is rich, happy, and powerful. Not another spell cast—all our worries laid to rest. And you get an undeniable victory of unquantifiable scope against someone who wronged you so much in the past.”

Hegazar stared at Argrave for an uncomfortably long time. Then, he opened his mouth in a grin and said, “Do you know why you’re not dead?”

Argrave tensed. “Does anyone?”

Hegazar laughed. “I suppose not. Well... I think you’ve a bright future. I have an eye for people—Vera may be a betrayer, but I won’t deny her talent and skill,” the man admitted freely now that she was not here. “You’re already aligned against Vera. Bearing this in mind, I’ll give you what’s in the heart chamber,” the Magister nodded.

"I'm surprised," Argrave admitted.

"But I've learned from Vera's betrayal, you see. I'll take everything in the vault, but I won't kill Vera. She's had chances to kill me in the past, you know, but she didn't take them. Call me sentimental, but she can't die too easy," he said. Argrave couldn't be sure if he was being entirely honest. "Instead... let me promise you this. You owe me a debt, kinslayer. And when I call on you to pay that debt... if it's left unpaid, Vera and I will both make it our mission to end you." Hegazar's smile widened. "That's why you did that charade, wasn't it? To keep us divided?"

Slowly, Argrave nodded.

"I thought so," Hegazar nodded. "Vera will hate you. I can promise you that. She'll hate you *much* more than she hates me. And me... well, I can be your proponent, absorbing most of her wrath, or your death sentence," the Magister's husky, hoarse voice took on a grim aspect that was somewhat chilling. "So, with that out of the way—how, dare I ask, do you intend to move this giant fortress?"

Exhausted, Argrave said simply, "Just a little elbow grease."

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"You really had the guts to nearly kill one of your men for this?" the Magister said, gaze wandering to the elven warrior. "You were playing a high-stakes game, it would seem."

"Galamon is... hardy, and reliable besides," Argrave explained weakly.

Hegazar watched the two in what might've been wonder, but his face quickly turned bitter as he noted Argrave's smile. "Hmm... let's just get this over with before I change my mind."

All of them stepped within the brain chamber. Argrave looked to be sure everything was in order, then stepped within. He was acutely aware of Hegazar's presence, waiting for any last-moment betrayals. He thought things were put to bed... but they'd only be so once this living fortress started moving.

"Alright," Argrave cracked his knuckles, looking at the Magister. "I have a relatively straightforward route in mind. Put the key Anneliese's Starsparrow removed back in, give it a command to move, and we just put our hands to this apparatus. It'll use our magic to traverse beneath the ground."

"We?" the Magister repeated.

"If you're in the mood for charity," Argrave nodded.

"This thing drains magic, does it not?" Hegazar looked at it. "Without magic, what am I? A fleshy bag who's never been in a fight. At the very least, you can carry much more than I can... I don't wish to imagine how hard you hit. All of you."

Argrave's gaze wandered to Hegazar's fingers. "I wonder how many B-rank spells you have in those rings, there. And you've certainly got more jewelry hidden—hard to see behind the gray robes. I have this," Argrave raised up his own hand, where one could barely see a single ring. "And I got a few more rings from Induen, but none of them fit, and I don't know what they do... it's hard to compare."

Hegazar brought his hand up and ran his thumb across the rings on his finger. "Well... even still..."

"I can have Galamon wait far away, if it comforts you," Argrave assured. "Just consider this... a great equalizer. You can pull your hand free anytime, and I'm not even sure it'll drain all our magic. These living fortresses—they're very efficient at burrowing. The Order of the Rose was the foremost authority on earth magic, after all. The surface won't even be disturbed."

"You'll get it started," Hegazar said, paranoid to the end. "Provided nothing strange happens, I'll join after... a second or two."

Argrave nodded. "Well then... let's get going, partner."

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 232: Moving Past

Argrave once again felt the familiar sensation of being trapped within something that was in motion. It had been a long while since he last had the experience—the movement of the living fortress was so smooth it could be likened to travelling on a train or a car.

Hegazar, Anneliese, Argrave, and Durran held their hands to the fleshy apparatus in the back of the room, siphoning their magic into the vast fortress. It had been given a series of commands sequentially and burrowed through the earth efficiently. Argrave had done this quest enough to remember the commands, fortunately—Elenore was the one to give the quest to the player, funnily enough. It felt like much of the tension had been dissolved, yet the budding nervousness of his eventual meeting with Princess Elenore was replacing it by the second.

The rumbling sensation of movement beneath their feet ended, and Argrave felt the pull of his magic end. Hegazar was the first to retract his hand.

"Looks like we made it," Argrave said, shaking his hand off. He didn't like the sensation of touching that thing at all. "It seems this was a worthwhile endeavor for all."

"I wonder what Vera must be thinking," the Magister mused, reaching down. He pulled free the ear key, holding it close to his person. "Well, it's no matter. Time is of the essence. Collect all that I promised you, and let's be off."

"What will you do to her?" Anneliese questioned.

Hegazar put the ear key into the slot closer to the door and stopped, turning his head back to Anneliese.

"What business is it of yours?" He questioned, tone passive.

Anneliese shrugged and walked forwards. "I am merely curious."

"She has many friends. I am not sure what I will do," Hegazar shook his head. "It requires deliberation."

"I thought you'd kill her immediately," Durran looked impressed.

"Told you I wouldn't already," Hegazar shook his head. "Violence is for savages. I can get more from her alive than dead. I just need to decide what state I'd like her alive in. A captive? Who knows..." he let out a long, almost sad sigh. "She had opportunities to kill me in the past, too. She didn't take them. Always wondered why..."

As Argrave pondered what the Magister was getting at, he spoke the key phrase for the door and it slid open. He walked out with a confident step.

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Their group had hauled out a great many things from the depths of the vaults, and all of it resided in the heart chamber. It was a great mound of enchanted items of varying value. Though Argrave would have been satisfied with the set of bronze jewelry he came here to get, he definitely would not protest to acquiring more valuable enchanting items. He'd have a very adept broker to sell them off to in short order, too. That, plus the other loot they'd acquired from the Archduke's palace or Induen's retinue.

Galamon offloaded what few books and such he held to Argrave, Anneliese, and Durran, and then stuffed everything within rather ungracefully. The more delicate stuff was wrapped, but altogether his backpack became a misshapen mass of valuables and Order of the Rose books. He had a king's ransom in his backpack. Altogether, an extremely profitable venture. It wasn't a flawless trip, but it was the best Argrave could scrape together sandwiched between two S-rank mages.

They departed from the living fortress just after that. Hegazar left with them. Once they reached the entrance, the stone tongue folded out for them, and into a vast network of tunnels: the abandoned sewers beneath Dirracha.

The tunnels were extremely narrow and simple. The floor was naturally eroded stone caused by the still-active waterways, while the area above was brown stone that was nothing more than a ceiling to prevent the smell of the wastewater from reaching the city streets. The newer city had been built atop this place, with new sewers that better utilized waste for fertilizer. Considering this place was a natural stream originally, the years had mostly purged any smell or sign this had been a sewer at all.

The confines of the living fortress offered more room to stretch than this place, though, and Argrave found himself ducking just to stand. "You're sure... there's a way out?" Hegazar looked around.

Argrave nodded. "Yeah. Just follow the stream down. Exit won't be far. It drains off into a lake. It's a relatively secluded place—just a few fishing towns. Forest should shield you from prying eyes. Well, not that prying eyes matter for an illusionist."

"And, eh... no, never mind. I'm leaving, then. This was... a more profitable trip than I thought it might be. You have potential. I suppose the two of you do, however long this thing lasts," Hegazar scanned Anneliese and Argrave. "Enjoy the honeymoon phase. That's all you can enjoy, before it all turns to shit."

"Good luck, Hegazar," Argrave said simply, disregarding the petty jabs entirely.

The illusionist turned and walked down into the lower portions of the sewer tunnel, moving quickly and steadily without another word.

"Good gods," Durran sighed, setting his glaive firmly on the ground and leaning on it. "This was an endeavor and a half."

"A prelude, nothing more," Argrave shook his head. "But I'll be damned if it wasn't a draining one."

"Do we rest?" Anneliese questioned, looking ahead into the tunnel. She cast some light ahead.

Argrave stepped forward, ducking his head as he advanced. "Not for long. Meeting Elenore is our top priority. Once we get things settled with her... we'll have true mobility."

Durran picked up his glaive, tapping it against the ground so that it echoed throughout the tunnel. "How scary is this sister of yours that all of this can be considered a prelude?"

Argrave rubbed his hands together. "She's harmless. She doesn't even have any guards. But I'm more worried about this than meeting Orion or Induen." Argrave surveyed his party. "Excellent work, everyone. We'll take a small break, then proceed."

His gaze lingered on Anneliese for a long moment. She got the message, and as the other two settled in, she walked towards him.

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"This turned out... okay," Argrave nodded, staring at the rushing stream at their feet. The both of them sat just beside their backpacks, a fair distance away from Durran and Galamon.

Anneliese looked to Argrave. "You will not fret that things did not end perfectly?"

Argrave chuckled. "No one died. Galamon got hurt the most. I don't know," Argrave shook his head. "Ever since Induen died, things have felt less... apocryphal. I still feel rushed, stressed, but I think... I think I can do this. It's starting to feel like I can do this. I'm still paranoid as all hell about what might go wrong, but it's different, now."

"I am glad," Anneliese said sincerely.

Argrave let a silence hang. "Looks like my advice helped you out," he finally said. "Certainly had no trouble playing that part."

Anneliese laughed quietly and leaned against Argrave's shoulder. "Yes, it did."

"I ought to be careful," Argrave mused jokingly. "Soon enough, you'll do everything I can, and then I'll just flounder about uselessly in the back while you save the world alone."

"I do not think I could," she shook her head.

Argrave watched the water pass them by, then finally decided to bring up the things that were truly sticking in his mind. "I didn't realize those things bothered you," he said.

"...to a lesser degree than I dramatized. But yes. They did," she confessed in a quiet whisper.

"Ending up sympathizing with Hegazar more than I thought I ever would," Argrave responded quietly, putting one hand to her head. "I can see why he's bitter. Hurt. Paranoid. I don't want to make those same mistakes. If I did something wrong, I want to fix it. Permanently, ideally."

"I am happy, you know," Anneliese shifted her head to look at him better. "Everyone has something that annoys the other. The engagement caught me off balance, at first... and I still believe it is detrimental, practically speaking... but it gives me a lot of comfort. Above all... I know you well, and I trust you enough to respect the actions you take that we disagree on. We cannot be compared to Hegazar and

Vera. From the beginning, both saw each other as tools. Hegazar sought to groom a young Wizard into a perfect partner. Vera sought to use a senior to rise in the ranks.”

Argrave looked at the rushing water for a long while, biting at his lip. “I guess they were perfect for each other.”

Anneliese let out a quiet grunt of agreement.

“Going to rely on you heavily with Elenore,” he brought back the matter at hand.

“Keeping watch on her emotions?” Anneliese lifted her head, alert.

Argrave nodded. “Yeah. This isn’t something we can afford to mess up. Elenore... she’s apathetic. I can’t deny she’s done a lot wrong, but there’s good in her. Just needs a positive influence, some basic human decency in her life. In Dirracha, human decency is a delicacy that people like Induen and Felipe like to eat alive. I think our blood relation might hinder things if I play my cards wrong. Nevertheless... the hell can I do?”

“Make contingencies, plans,” Anneliese advised at once.

“Let’s make them,” Argrave rose to his feet. “Plenty of time, anyway.”

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Princess Elenore was, by threat of execution, confined to her greenhouse on the distant outskirts of the Dragon Palace. She was not deterred by this. Over the years, she built several hidden passages to accommodate her burgeoning empire of business and information. They were dually for her personal use and to allow passage to people who could not freely roam the Dragon Palace. The fact she was able to do this beneath the king’s eye was already testament to her considerable influence and skill. Few knew of them, even her most trusted aides. And one of these passages... it was here, in this abandoned sewer.

After their short rest and strategy meeting, Anneliese scouted ahead to be sure none were coming. After finding no passengers, the four of them proceeded up into the abandoned tunnel, walking against the stream. At points it grew wider, forcing some difficult maneuvers, yet it was a rather uneventful hike over the slippery rock.

At a point, they came to a sheer cliff wall. The stream trickled down in a small waterfall, battering them with water. Argrave ran his hand along the wall, searching unsuccessfully. Durran stepped forth with furrowed brows and pushed a point—it slid in. With a loud *click*, a portion of the wall behind the waterfall loosened. Though not opening automatically, it did unlock. Argrave pushed it open and ducked through. His Brumesingers shook their fur out after they passed.

After Anneliese scouted the newly opened path, they proceeded once more. It was a tight and confined space, even more so than the shoddy sewers, and crudely dug. Eventually, it came to a very long flight of steep stairs. Their party climbed them quietly, well used to treacherous paths by this point.

At the top, a thin slab of impeccable stone bricks blocked their path. Argrave turned to Galamon, gesturing. The elven vampire gave a count—one. That meant whoever was up there presently was alone. He couldn’t be sure it was Elenore, though. This was certainly where she usually was, yet...

Deciding it was a gamble worth taking, Argrave gave a nod, scanning everyone to be sure they were prepared. To show sincerity to Elenore, Argrave intended to bring everyone.

Argrave pushed up on the stone slab above. It was a heavy thing, and he hefted it aside.

“Who is it?” a familiar female voice greeted him as he lifted the rock. “This isn’t on the schedule.”

Argrave climbed up, taking a look around the verdant greenhouse. A wave of nostalgia rushed over him as he recognized the many plants around... and the green-dressed person sitting at a pink table beside the fountain. She was thin, with long obsidian black hair identical in color to his own.

“Hello, Elenore,” Argrave said levelly, rising to his feet and glancing about. True to Galamon’s words, no one was present. “This place looks beautiful as usual.”

“I don’t recognize your voice,” she said tensely, putting her hands on the arms of her wheelchair.

“It’s Argrave,” he greeted. “I’d like to talk. It’s rather important, so I hope you can forgive the rude entrance.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 233: Princess, Locked Away

Elenore saw nothing at all, as she ever did.

Yet she could hear them. Multiple strangers, emerging from one of the secret passages she had installed to facilitate her agent’s activities. It felt like her sanctuary had been violated—not the greenhouse, but her existence as the Bat. Though she always felt disconcerted by Argrave’s unpredictable activities, she was confident it would be a long, long time before she ever spoke to him face-to-face, if at all.

Elenore did not know why he had come here. Perhaps Induen had told him something. All of her servants would be away for a long while. She might call for help, yet none would hear her most likely—even if they did, it would only seal her fate. But then... if Argrave intended to kill her, that would already be done.

Still, she knew she could not wait passively.

“My servants will be by soon,” she lied at once. “If you wish to speak, you might take me to a more private location.”

“That seems—” Argrave began, and Elenore thought he was agreeing. She heard something—a scrape of leather, what she presumed to be a boot tapped against a boot, and Argrave grew quiet. “No, let’s stay here. I’ll take my chances,” he said, leaving no room for argument.

Someone here knows I lie, and they told him. A traitor? Elenore thought of all near her, listening to the way they breathed, walked, for any hint it might be someone close to her. *If it is a traitor, it is no wonder this is so well-timed.*

Someone moved a little closer, and Elenore resisted the urge to tense. Argrave continued, “Well, I think introductions are in order. I’m here with Galamon. He’s a snow elf. There’s Durran—he’s a tribal from the south, the Burnt Desert. And then there’s Anneliese, my fiancée. Maybe you knew all this, but...”

What he said matched with what Elenore knew, but she couldn't place why he was saying this. Maybe he was lying to disguise who was truly here... but his tone didn't betray dishonesty. But then, all her reports placed him as someone who was skilled at manipulation. She couldn't say for sure.

All of the people that Argrave introduced greeted her—a deep, guttural voice from a man, a calm and smooth woman's voice, and a somewhat deep voice from another man. She didn't recognize any of them.

"May I sit?" Argrave asked.

Elenore stayed silent for a few moments, then decided to probe his temperament with a minutely combative statement. "Would it matter if I said no?"

"Well, I would have to stay standing. My legs might get tired," Argrave returned. "I suppose that isn't the end of the world."

His levity frustrated Elenore. She couldn't glean any of his intentions. But... given all of his actions, she could assume that he wasn't here for a wholly negative purpose, such as vengeance for spurring conflict between him and Induen.

"You may sit," Elenore agreed, seeing no merit to refusing.

She heard the scrape of the metal chair against the stone, and then the brief movement of the wind as Argrave moved to sit. "Thank you," he said.

"What did you wish to speak of?" she got to the point, ceding the conversation to Argrave's direction. It was not the thing she was most eager to know—she wished to learn of how he'd found that entrance, primarily—but it was the question she thought would yield the most information. Gaining knowledge of the situation was the most important thing to gaining control of it.

She heard Argrave shift ahead of her, remaining silent. He did not hasten to speak—it showed experience in conversation, she thought. Eventually, he said, "I brought a gift for you. Galamon, could you please...?" She heard something heavy collapse to the ground—by the jingling, a bag or box full of loose metal pieces. "Careful with that..." Argrave's voice tightened.

After a few moments of metal jingling, Elenore's discomfort rose. "Perhaps you had best tell me what it is."

"You'll s—" he stopped guiltily. 'See,' he had meant to say, Elenore knew. "Well, it's jewelry. Experimental enchanted jewelry. I... well, I can't fully describe what it does. This piece... thanks, Galamon..." she heard the light clinking of metal as something was passed to him. "This piece is a... sort of a bronze claw ring, covers the whole finger. A bit ungainly, I suppose... may I put it on you?"

She didn't know the answer to that question. Was he toying with her? Was it some foul implement? He had called it 'ungainly.' Or was it genuinely a gift?

"Let me hold it," she requested after an uncertain moment. She held out her hand.

She heard movement. "Sure," he said, and then something dropped into her hand.

Elenore held it close, moving her fingers across it. It was a segmented ring that did indeed cover the whole finger, with a point at the end. From the feel and hardness of it, she judged it to be bronze as he said. It had some carvings on the side. She could feel no gemstones. Its insides had no spikes. Whether or not it was enchanted, she could not know.

After a moment to muster herself, she slid the ring over her finger. Once it slid on...

Pale beige. Her hand.

Elenore recoiled from the strong sensation she felt, holding the hand with the ring out. Her breathing quickened involuntarily. For some strange reason, she had a sense of the space around her far enhanced beyond what it usually was. She lowered her hand ever so slowly. Her finger hovered. Some indiscernible sensation told her that the table was not an inch away. And after an inch lower...

Steel painted bright pink. A table.

Elenore held her finger there for a long, long time, taking hold of the sensation. It was not as though she could see once again. And yet... she knew what was there. She understood the table, could grasp it completely. She could perceive the pink like she truly saw it. It was like some sixth sense that was, in a way, far more accurate than she ever recalled her sight being. She could barely distinguish the ground beneath the table, or Argrave's elbow resting atop it.

"Are you okay?" Argrave asked. "Maybe you ought to take it off..."

Elenore only now reflected back on herself. She was breathing quickly and sweating. Yet even still, this sensation pulled at her. It was like a drop of water to a man who'd hiked the desert without.

"A book," she said. "Please, give me a book. On the table, over there. My maid was reading from it earlier."

She heard Argrave move. Now, she was more aware of him—she had an image of someone leaning forth, stretching their arm out. "Here it is," he narrated, setting it just before her.

Elenore grasped the book, opening it to a random page. Slowly, tentatively, like everything would blow away if she moved too fast, she pressed her ringed finger against the top of the page.

Some nobles chose to offload the burden of collecting taxes to agencies. These agencies had tremendous influence in the past, often abusing the power vested in them by the lord to extort subjects out of things not ordinarily taxed, cows being the most prominent example. So long as the arrangement was mutually beneficial, the lords—

Elenore lifted her finger up. She could read again. She could see the letters, comprehend them, process them, all on her own. No longer did she have to rely on another for everything. Her world was no longer one consisting of trusting another. She felt a strong pull at her throat. It had been such a long time since she felt this feeling... parts of it were missing, of course. The tears were the most recognizable part of crying, and she could not spill them.

But Elenore did not forget herself. Gifts often costed more than gold. She could not allow herself to be overcome, not ever. She could not let anyone see her emote. Being overcome was the reason she had become as she was. It was the reason this ring affected her so to begin with.

Princess Elenore took a long moment, steadying her breathing and ensuring her voice would come out clearly. She acted as though she was reading along with the book. When next she spoke...

"Why are you giving this to me?" her voice came out smoothly.

"Well..." Argrave scratched something—she couldn't tell what. Almost by instinct, she moved her hand closer, and the perception became clearer. He scratched his chin. "That's only one piece of a set. The rest of it will augment what you're feeling now tremendously. Durran, could you put the rest of the stuff down?"

"What, Galamon gets a nice 'please,' but I don't?" Despite his protests, the man quickly placed some things on the table. When his hand moved by hers, she noticed something.

"You're missing fingers," she whispered, then scolded herself. She was rattled. She hated feeling this way.

The man laughed. "Huh. Guess the ring does work. Strange place to see from, but if it works, it works."

"Be polite, Durran," Argrave reprimanded.

"Come on," Durran said disbelievingly. "I didn't say anything bad. Even if I did, she's a tough lady. She's gotta be."

Elenore cradled the ringed finger to numb the new sensations she was experiencing. "You still did not tell me why, Argrave."

"I need your help," he said outright.

The words were sobering, and helped Elenore master her emotions. "With what?" she pressed, her mind falling back into its usual mode of risk-reward analysis.

"I need to prove something," he said. "To you. To a select few people besides you. And later, to everyone."

Elenore was puzzled. She contemplated his meaning—was it a metaphor? Did he intend to prove his mettle? Did he wish to prove some magical theory? She had heard whispers of something called Blood Infusion originating from Argrave—was it related to that?

Considering his geniality thus far, Elenore asked outright, "What do you want to prove?"

"I know you pretty well. I don't think I'm as smart as you, but I've got a good grasp on what you've been doing." She heard the chair shift—he likely leaned back. "Obviously, you're wondering how I learned of your secret passage. To that, I say this: I know about all of them. The drainage gate by the glass. The one in the shed for the gardeners. The emergency exit in your bedroom, behind your nightstand. I know you're the Bat, and I know your principal businesses—the brewery and alchemist partnerships, the sponsored enchanters, and probably more recently, the smiths and crafters."

The extent of his knowledge did unnerve her. If his source was a traitor, it was someone extremely close to her. It might be Therese, Elenore reasoned. Considering all that happened to her, it would not surprise.

"I'm going to be frank with you, because I think you can appreciate that," Argrave said. The chair shifted once again, and his voice grew closer. "I didn't learn about any of this stuff through subterfuge or research. Everything I've done—maybe I'm getting an ego suggesting this, but I think you've noticed how seemingly random and omniscient it is. The Veidimen invasion, that business in the Burnt Desert, or the plague and how to end it... my source of knowledge is not of this world."

Elenore processed Argrave's claims quietly.

"I hope you can give me a chance to prove that," Argrave said. "And at the same time, prove that there's something extremely big coming on the horizon. Something that can turn this entire continent upside down." She perceived Argrave reaching out, but he hesitated to touch her and moved his hands back. "I very desperately need your help. I can keep rattling off obscure factoids we both know to prove I'm being honest, but at the end of the day it boils down to that. I need your help."

Elenore rubbed her hand against the claw ring on her finger. As Argrave said, it was ungainly, and the point was sharp and uncomfortable. Yet even as she sat there, she perceived her skin. She had grown much paler, she realized. When last she remembered seeing her skin, it had been so much tanner.

Sentimentality at the gift made her wish to say yes, she consciously realized. Yet... she could not think this way. It only led to suffering. Induen had been led by his sentimentality, his emotions. She could not allow herself to meet the same fate.

Yet... rationally speaking... Argrave, too, was another opportunity. She would have to discern, study, and evaluate how this unexpected happening fit into her plans. She had done so with all of her agents once before—this was merely another to fit into the design. She could not turn it away. He'd already proven himself to be capable of gaining things of great value.

"Let's talk specifically," Elenore finally said.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 234: City of Dragons

"We can get into the specifics of what I intend to prove, of course," Argrave told Elenore. "On top of that, I have some information that leads me to believe there might be a traitor in your group. I'm sure you're curious about the items I've just unloaded onto you. That said, I've also not slept for what feels like days. The drainage gate passage—there's a safehouse in it. Is it empty? Can we use it? I'd like to stay within Dirracha, and considering what happened with Induen, I can't exactly roam about freely."

Elenore let out a shocked chuckle. "Yes, it's empty. Considering no one has used it before, of course it's empty. You may use it as you please."

Argrave's claims of otherworldly knowledge gained more credence with every new detail he revealed, but Elenore had to remain skeptical. A traitor? Was he hinting at something, or being genuine? She might be drawn into a trap if she too readily accepted what he told her. Argrave was a very valuable piece she could utilize—despite the south's compunctions with his close ties with foreigners, he remained a closely-considered candidate that the rebels might herald. Having him at hand could be very useful for her future.

"I appreciate it. We'll convene tomorrow." She heard the chair shift, and presumed Argrave rose up to his feet. "I hope that we'll come to work together closely in the coming month. If I know you, you're thinking that you should go along with me out of practicality above anything... Anneliese?"

Elenore did her best to keep her reaction to his accurate words muted. She wondered why he had called out his fiancée's name.

"Yeah," Argrave said after a moment. "I hope you enjoy the gift. I think you... deserve it."

Elenore caught his pause. She wondered what it meant—was there some drawback to these pieces, a cost of some sort?

"Well, have a nice day, Elenore. Don't stay up all night reading. It's bad for you."

Argrave walked away, and his companions followed just after him.

"Wait," Elenore called out. "Induen."

Argrave scoffed. "Him? Oh, I imagine you'd like his signet ring. Given its uses in forging and the like, I imagine you'll find more use out of it than I will..." she heard him rummaging through his pockets.

"No," Elenore said, moving her head to where his voice came from. "Induen sought to ally with you. He avoided my informants because he sought to avoid conflict with you, opposite my intentions. So, why did you decide to act as you did?"

"He made some very untenable suggestions," Argrave said with some degree of levity. His next words were completely serious as he continued, "More than that... he was a tumor. I had a chance to excise that tumor before it could cause more damage than it already has. He wanted to kill you, you know. Everybody's future is a lot brighter without his shadow over it. You can trust that."

"Without doubt," Elenore confirmed.

Argrave chuckled. "But... well, Induen is just one limb of Felipe's shadow," he said grimly, then paused for a long while. "And our true enemy... has yet... to reveal himself," Argrave finished, mimicking some strange accent. His voice trailed off as he grew further away.

Elenore kept listening as Argrave departed, paying close attention to the footfalls against the stone. It was only after near a minute had passed that her posture relaxed somewhat. She ran the claw ring across the pink metal table, the book, and then found some of the other pieces placed atop it.

After a moment... Elenore wheeled her chair forward personally. She could perceive the wheels turning as she touched them—the coarseness of the wood that had rolled against the ground for months on end, the light brown impeccably polished. She stopped at a point. She knew where to stop—not from smell, nor sound, nor touch... but because she could perceive.

Princess Elenore held her hand out, moving past the flower and grabbing the stem. She made out a bright blue bulb glowing, pulsing. She smiled and tore it free, and the glow doubled in intensity. As she enjoyed the unprecedented sensation, for some reason she was reminded she had not thanked Argrave. Her smile faded. Feeling disquieted, she let the flower fall from her grip.

Elenore leaned back and sighed. Had she really had that conversation? With whom? Who was Argrave? As ever, her sole need was information.

#####

"Big day tomorrow. We'd best sleep immediately." Argrave noted as he weaved through this familiar maze of flowers and greenery.

Everything here exuded richness and profoundness—the greens felt deeper, the purples more regal, and the sunlight itself warped through the glass above into something that cast beautiful shadows over the marble walkway.

"After we put everything with Elenore into motion, start the process of getting her looped in... there are some things that need to be done in Dirracha. I'll—" Argrave glanced back as he walked, and cut himself off. "What are you doing?"

Durran had paused and examined the nearby plants. As though shaken from a stupor by Argrave's voice, he shook his head and turned back, walking to rejoin them. "Nothing. Sorry. Move on, commander."

Argrave's frown slowly morphed into a slight smile. "I forgot. You like gardening. Of course you'd be interested in a place like this."

"What?" Durran said, voice uncharacteristically loud. "When did I say I liked gardening?"

"When have you needed to tell me things about yourself?" Argrave reminded him.

"Well... it's not..." Durran looked to Anneliese, and his words caught in his throat like he realized any denial would be fruitless. "...pissed," he cursed beneath his breath. "Fine. Yeah. Whatever. I was just thinking... wasn't bad enough your dad cut off her feet and gouged out her eyes, he confines her to a place like this. Some cruel joke, like doing that wasn't punishment enough."

"Provided you clear it with Elenore, she can probably work something out about letting you come here often," Argrave said. "And I'll keep to my word. After the things you did in the wetlands, I'll give you some money, let you have a little bit of fun in the city."

"...and if Orion's here? Bit of a damper for fun," Durran questioned.

Argrave paused and swallowed. "Well, you'll have to recite all 96 gods," Argrave said with a smile.

"Yeah, you're right. We'll get a handle of the situation with Elenore." His gaze switched to Galamon.

"And you. Be careful hunting. There's some competition for food in this city."

Galamon adjusted his helmet. "I am careful."

Argrave nodded in contentment. "Then... at morning, you and I will parse through the stuff we looted from the fortress," Argrave looked to Anneliese. "We'll prepare a nice little package for Elenore to sell, earn some additional financing. Returns will be much quicker than with Elaine, and it'll be necessary in the further reaches of the north. The princess is... capable."

"Certainly," Anneliese agreed easily.

With a nod, Argrave commended them, saying, “Excellent. A lot of plots are tightly entwined here. Galamon. The solution to your problem...” Argrave referred to his vampirism vaguely, feeling no need to take risks. “The ball will start rolling here. And I imagine you’ll be just as eager to see this proof as Elenore is, Durran. As for myself, well... maybe we’ll find out if Orion was right, and I do have a divine right. Something tells me a few key points may have been lost in translation between the gods, Orion, and me.”

Despite their fatigue, Argrave’s words seemed to rouse everyone, even himself.

“I love big cities,” Argrave ruminated, moving to action once again. “Let’s enjoy our stay at the City of Dragons.”

#####

“Yes, I’m certain. Do not bar me further,” Orion cautioned.

“Y-yes, my prince,” the dirty-looking man wearing ragged, almost disposable rags lowered his body deeply.

Orion stepped past the metal gate and down the stairs below. The way was dark, dimly lit by cheap magic lights. After a while, he smelled something foul, and knew he was near.

Prince Orion emerged into the sewers of Dirracha. This place, though foul, was well-constructed and well-maintained, unlike the sewers of old. Water was not vital with the existence of mages, but proper harvests were—waste was generally used for fertilizer, helping ensure the best harvests. Orion had been taught as much in his education as a prince.

The gods had been whispering at him feverishly, instructing him to come to the sewers in myriad ways, and growing more frustrated as he visited more and more of them. His father had tasked him with finding Argrave, and this was their advice.

Yet he could not understand it. Every day, he felt himself insufficient to comprehend their guidance.

Orion stepped down the pathways, looking around not knowing for what. His father had directed him to find Argrave and deal with him. He could not disobey an order from his father—it was not right, not holy. Yet even still... his father commanded him to sin. To slay a brother, as Argrave had done.

The news of Induen’s death felt like the world turning up on itself. He had trusted Argrave. The man had acted selflessly—he had acted against his own interest, trying and bleeding to put an end to the plague. And now, Argrave had turned his back on his family. He had committed a grave sin.

Was it his fault? Orion felt that it was. He felt party to the blasphemy. He should have known better—should have thought longer. All of this could have been avoided. Argrave promised to teach him how to do these things, and yet...

Orion stopped, closing his eyes and listening to the whispers of the gods. Here, in the silence of the sewers, he could hear them all too clearly.

“I shouldn’t have listened to Argrave,” he told them. “I shouldn’t have listened to Induen.”

Their whispers returned. They were too many to make sense of—some offered comfort, some gloated over his poor judgement, some advised him, and some ignored him altogether.

Orion opened his eyes like epiphany dawned on him, and he leaned against the slick, wet wall. A thought raced through his head. Was that their message? Was that *Argrave's* message?

Should he... stop listening?

Orion grabbed at his chest, feeling as though his heart would burst free. He felt sick and wrong, entertaining even the notion. Before he knew it, Orion was furiously racing up. He ran out back to where the sewer keeper was, and immediately stepped out. His royal knights were waiting for him outside, yet he ran past them, down the perfect streets of Dirracha.

To stop listening... to stop being told what to do... Orion felt it was a perverse notion. Yet nothing had ever called to him so strongly. He had been taught enough. Perhaps it was time to learn. Perhaps it was time to be as everyone else and find his answers with his own ability.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 235: Help Yourself

It was early morning. Durran stood near a large bush covered in black flowers. Though he noticed the blooms, his interest seemed to be focused on how they grew and how they were planted above anything else. He toyed with the leaves, almost testing them. He was so absorbed in the task that he could not hear someone moving towards him.

"Durran, yes?" Elenore asked, her chair coming to halt.

He jumped slightly, but then rose up to his feet. "Yeah, that's me. Just enjoying the... the fragrance of this place. Never been anywhere like here, before. It's a bit sparse in terms of flora where I lived, not sure if you know..."

"I see," Elenore nodded. She was much more decorated than she had been yesterday, having donned much of the bronze jewelry Argrave had brought her—necklaces, bracelets, earrings, even more of the ungainly claw rings. "The Burnt Desert. A long way from home. A long way to travel," she said, a question hidden on her tone.

Durran stared at her empty sockets for a long while. "It is. He's not paying me, either. I'm either quite the sucker... or Argrave's maybe got something special to him." Durran laughed quietly. "Gods, even that silent giant Galamon got paid. At least Anneliese is getting some nightly... well, let's not get graphic."

Elenore exhaled from her nose—not quite a laugh, but near it. "I noticed you don't like to do that."

"What's that mean?" Durran scratched the back of his head.

"You refrain from talking about what you see near me," Elenore continued.

Durran shifted on his feet. "Well... it's a bit distasteful, I think. Hey, I can see all this cool stuff! Wow, it's so beautiful!" Durran waved his hands about. "Like I was telling Argrave, I think that was the point of this place. Every time someone visits you, they talk about this place's beauty. Like a constant reminder of what you're missing."

"Maybe," Elenore nodded.

"Your dad's a real sack of shit," Durran looked up to the glass above.

Elenore tilted her head but did not disagree. "Why would you think I would not like to hear I am surrounded by beauty?"

Durran stared at her face. "Surrounded by it, huh?" He laughed and scratched his chin. "Well... suppose it doesn't matter anymore. You can see things again, if I'm understanding Argrave right."

"I can perceive things, especially if I touch them," Elenore said. "But... yes, I have a rough awareness of the space around me, now. If I had my prosthetics, I suspect I could walk without bumping into anything. But they hurt if I wear them too long. I don't wear them often."

Durran put his hand on his armor's belt, staring at her missing feet with consideration. "You know... Argrave's said he's going to help me regrow my fingers."

Silence reigned for a moment, and then she asked, "Do you believe him?"

"You're supposed to be the master of an information network. You tell me," Durran pointed to her with his hand missing three fingers. "You've heard of what he's done. You know what he's capable of. I get some skepticism, but... good gods, we've got a silver platter and you're still testing the meal for poison. Argrave is being honest with you—this is an earth-shattering event."

Elenore placed her hands on her lap. "I hope you can appreciate it might be difficult to trust when someone I thought loved me sawed my feet off. He stared me in the face as he gouged out my eyes so that his visage was the last thing I beheld."

Durran stood still for a time, digesting her point and debating whether or not to say something. "Well, I knew a guy that had no arms or legs. Had to be carried everywhere. His son did that to him," Durran emphasized the last part in comparison. "He started off just like you—skeptical of everything, everyone." Durran shook his head. "Key phrase there is 'knew a guy.' He couldn't trust anyone until the end. Now, he's dead. Just a memory in my head. I don't want to see history repeating itself."

Elenore kept her face towards him, silent. Durran didn't have Anneliese's ability, but he thought she was a bit stunned. Eventually, she pursed her lips and said, "Every conversation I share, I am the weaker party. I am always the lesser, and the lesser is discarded *without fail*. I act this way because I must."

Durran shook his head. "You did. That's changed." He let out a long, piteous sigh. "I'll admit—what you've built from your position? It's incredible. I don't think anyone else could have done it. All you had starting off was a few servants loyal to your father first, and your word. Shoddy tools for building anything... but you've built an empire. What now? Stand on your tower alone? Sounds... empty," Durran shrugged.

"I—" Elenore began, her voice with more inflection than it usually had. She turned her head off to the side. "It seems I share too much. Argrave gave good advice to sleep tonight, and it seems I ignored it. I should retire. Forgive me."

"You're apologizing?" Durran furrowed his brows, confused. "Well, I don't accept your apology. Consider yourself unforgiven. Own who you are. Decide if that's who you want to be," he pointed to her.

Elenore did not respond, her head still facing off to the side.

Durran clicked his tongue and shifted on his feet. "I should get back. You want me to roll you somewhere before I go?"

"If you wish," she answered vaguely.

"Oh, yeah, I'm jumping for joy," Durran laughed. "Do I want to help you? No. You have to want it. That's another lesson I learned, at a little place called Sethia." Durran laughed again and shook his head. "I'll leave you be. Get some rest, if you want."

Durran moved away in a brisk pace. Elenore remained in place, listening to him leave. After a while, she let out another light laugh through her nose, a little stronger this time.

#####

"I trust you're familiar with a group called the Rancor?" Argrave questioned Elenore, feeling rejuvenated after a good sleep.

They sat together in a more secluded place than they had yesterday—instead of in the main courtyard, they were in Elenore's room sitting around a table. The place was just a large undecorated bed and table in a veritable gardener's shed. Elenore had foregone the presence of servants, perhaps to better hide Argrave's presence. Galamon stood at the doorway, monitoring the outside.

"Certainly," Elenore nodded. She had donned most of the bronze pieces that Argrave had gave her. The bronze clashed with her obsidian hair but matched well with the green she usually donned. "We have some ties. They're smugglers, mostly, but a general criminal syndicate here in the capital. Why? Are they the source of this traitor you mentioned?"

Argrave shook his head. Anneliese noticed something on a stand in the corner of the room and stood from her seat, moving to examine it. Argrave followed Anneliese with his gaze as he answered Elenore, "Not likely, no. Maybe I'd best pass on the message directly. 'The Bat cannot hear everything, especially not that hiding in its own fur,'" Argrave repeated Ingo's warning. "A little warning from a friend."

"Prophecy," Elenore noted. Behind her, Anneliese fiddled with a white apparatus that looked to handle water.

"You can think of it like that," Argrave nodded, furrowing his brows as he watched Anneliese. "Be careful. I know you're good at what you do, but working with scummy people tends to be challenging," Argrave said, thinking of the journey with the two Magisters. "Even if you think I'm just a nut, better safe than sorry."

"This brews tea," Anneliese said in revelation.

Argrave smiled. "Anne..."

"Forgive me," she set it down. "It just drew my attention."

Argrave was surprised by her uncharacteristic absent-mindedness. They had discussed the meeting with Elenore in great detail this morning, and both felt things were going well. At the very least, they were

going according to plan. Even still, she usually did not lose herself to fancy as she had in months prior. This was the first time in a long while.

"She's fine," Elenore held up her hand, the bronze bangle on her wrist clinking about. "I'll limit visits from non-essential personnel, have people watch key entrances," she decided. "It is as you say. I cannot be too cautious."

"You can be too cautious," contributed Durran. Argrave looked at him, puzzled, but saw Elenore smile faintly and decided to drop it.

"The upper echelon of Rancor," Argrave brought the topic back to the matter at hand. "Noticed any incongruities?"

Elenore shook her head. "I don't think so."

"You should doublecheck that," Argrave tapped the table. "Get some of your best guys on it. I think you'll be surprised by what you find... and once you find it, we can proceed from there."

Elenore nodded. "Alright. If I find nothing?"

"I don't know. Point and laugh at me, throw me out," Argrave shrugged, running out of ways to say that he wouldn't be wrong.

Elenore retrieved some paper and a writing implement and wrote things down. The lines were sloppy, but legible. A smile came to his face as he watched her write—it felt fulfilling.

"And what will you do?" she questioned, setting her implement aside.

"Well..." Argrave leaned in a bit closer. "What have you heard?"

Elenore's lips twitched as she debated what to say. Eventually, she decided. "Build your own army. A better one."

"Yep," Argrave lightly slapped the table and rose. "Lot of untapped forces in the north. I need to tap them. And I think I can. Anneliese and I will work things out."

"Like Veiden?" her head turned to Anneliese, eyeless sockets dark.

Argrave laughed. "Oh yeah. And the Burnt Desert, too. Got an army of wyvern-riding tribals." He shook his head. "Just a bunch of people who want something. Some people have power but want prestige. Others, the inverse. Speak the right words, the north folds. Doubly so if rumors of Felipe's spreading the plague to the south gets out."

"The self-governing city," Elenore turned her head back to Argrave. "The merchant oligarchs."

Argrave furrowed his brows but smiled. "You're pretty smart." Argrave tapped the chair a few times, then said, "Thanks for your hospitality. Send for me anytime you want to talk further."

"Wait," Elenore said as Argrave made to leave, the others rising to follow. Argrave paused and looked back—Elenore looked flustered, like she hadn't intended to say 'wait.'

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"Yeah, sure," Argrave accepted it easily.

"For what?" Durran pressed sternly. Argrave looked at him, perplexed.

"For... these," Elenore gestured to the claw rings over her fingers. "I... have never received anything that..." She shook her head and ran her fingers through her hair. "I like it very much," she said quickly.

"Well, that was the hope. Kind of why I got it," Argrave nodded. "Enjoy. You deserve it."