

Jackal 256

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Chapter 256: Profligacy and Corruption

Orion wandered through this unending black desert, lost once again. Though he had known he wanted to come here, now that he was here... he was once again adrift, utterly lost to his next direction. All he did was walk towards the distant white palace he saw, half-thinking it a mirage.

The prince had come to the south to speak with the Margrave of Parbon, Reinhardt. Once he arrived, Orion realized things would not be so dreamy and simple. At the time, the Margrave had actually been away—war was a busy time, and as things neared their beginning, the castle became a last resort rather than a constant home.

With his size and recognizable features, Orion was not confident of remaining long enough in Parbon territory for the Margrave to return... nor was he confident in tracking the man down without hostilities erupting. And so, instead of persisting as the crown prince in the midst of enemy territory... with a heavy heart, Orion abandoned the idea.

Instead, Orion passed over the mountain in the middle of the night, and as he crested their peak, a scene of two skies spread out before him—one in the sky, and one on the ground. It took a moment for him to realize that he saw sand—black sand. It was a land of beauty that he had never devoted his time to study... and a land in which the gods of Vasquer were foes, not friends.

Now, Orion wandered that black sand. The sun beat gently on his skin. It was neither boring nor harrowing—indeed, as the voices constantly whispering in his mind grew lesser and lesser, there was a strange tinge of the foreign that both terrified and excited Orion. The blessings were within him—he could not be parted from them—but it seemed that things were as the gods claimed, and the lands beyond Vasquer were truly untouched by their presence.

Before Orion realized it, he walked upon caked black clay, and the palace of whiteness before him was no mirage. Orion saw two men garbed in strange, foreign clothing, standing guard at the gate. He walked towards them. He saw the all-too-familiar sight of fear within their eyes... and they held their spears to block him.

“Stop right there. No outsiders allowed,” one of the men informed him.

Orion regarded them coolly, feeling a strange calmness. They had skin a different color than his—a different color than most in Vasquer. It was darker, tanner. Beyond, he saw a great assemblage of people walking, talking. Their manner of dress was foreign, and their appearances were unlike any had seen before.

“Why?” Orion asked.

“An outsider wreaked havoc in the distant south. Our mistress has forbidden us from allowing any outsiders to pay for food or water in fear of such a thing happening once again,” the spearman informed him curtly. “Now, step away. The Vessels of Fellhorn protect Delphasium. You shall join His eternal rain if you dare try anything,” he threatened.

Orion felt his wrath stir, yet without the whispers of the gods to spur him he was able to calm himself. He stepped away from the spearman, mind whirling with the new information conveyed to him. This outsider—based on all Durran had told him of their journeys, he knew it had to be Argrave. And then, Orion spotted another.

The man, who sat cross-legged beneath a tarp beside the pearly white walls, was in such poor health as to appear dead. He was more skeleton than flesh. And yet... as he watched, Orion saw he had golden eyes. It reminded him of the tribal from this land that he had taken under his wing. Orion stepped up to this man.

Kneeling, Orion asked quietly, "Are you an outsider, too?"

The man regarded him with his eyes but seemed to offer no answer.

"I can give you water if—" Orion paused. He was about to ask the man to convert. "Do you want water?" he instead asked.

The man's golden eyes swam, appraising Orion more thoroughly. "You're one of them?" he asked, voice a clicking rasp.

Orion looked to the side where the spearmen watched them. "No," he answered.

"I'll not... take charity," the man told him with a bitter snarl that brought life back into his face. "I'd sooner die... than take it. Like the others... gone southward... empty promises."

Orion blinked, trying to think of what the man might mean. "What happened in the south?"

"Lords... dead," the man said. "A new hope. A new city. A false... hope, I say. Fellhorn... all gods... eat man."

Orion rose to his feet. He looked back to the spearman, deliberating on whether or not to ask them more questions. He considered forcing his way past those men, or climbing the walls, or any number of things... yet at the end, this talk of lords enticed him. He still remembered well the tales that Durran had told him.

"Which way is south?" Orion asked the man.

"Just... leave," the man said, his dry mouth failing even now. "This place is lost. Eaten by the sun, like a man collapsed in the desert."

"I just want to learn," Orion said neutrally.

"Learn?" A dry laugh escaped the man's cracked lips.

"Learn where I looked towards," Orion explained, looking down at the man once again.

The tribal looked up at him, eyes like golden rings against the light of the suns. "Opposite wall," the man responded finally, lowering his head. "Road... a partial one."

Orion nodded and walked away, leaving nothing behind.

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Elenore remained distant for a day. She was unapproachable, quite literally—Argrave didn't know where she was for the whole day, but he didn't see her. He might've sent Anneliese and her Starsparrow scouting but felt such a thing might be rude—Elenore must've merely wished to be alone with her grief. He could see plainly that she was working, for her people came and went and messages were sent and received. Argrave and his companions, well used to sleeping outside, did so. In truth, Argrave was glad to be resting.

Nevertheless, the next day, the wheel for the cart was finally repaired. It had merely been an excuse to stop, but now it quite literally did stop their advance. Not too long after that, Elenore reemerged. She walked up to Argrave beside Melanie as though nothing had occurred between them at all.

"Good morning," Elenore greeted. Her voice was somewhat hoarse.

"Sister," Argrave greeted. The word felt unnatural on his tongue, but he was forcing himself to use it.

Melanie raised a brow when he said so. She held her zweihander in one hand, its blade leaning against her shoulder while its point stood towards the sky. "You're..."

Argrave looked at her. "Probably who you think, yes," he nodded. "Saw you at Mateth. You were working for my cousin, then. Or maybe you were still under Elenore."

"The Duke Enrico," Melanie corrected. "Well... well, well." The red-haired mercenary took a deep breath, then adjusted her wide-brimmed tellerbarret. "Suppose I should have guessed, looking at how big you are and all. Don't remember seeing you at Mateth. Just never thought... hah. You were in Dirracha while the funeral of the crown prince you murdered was happening. What a spectacle."

"We have a plan for entry into Relize," Elenore explained, brushing past their introduction. "Melanie..."

"Right," the mercenary nodded. "My family are patricians in Relize. I'd call them failed businessmen. They're trustworthy, though, and this cart is marked by them. The biggest problem might be other patrician families trying to rob us... but Elenore has plenty of men." Melanie scratched at her chin. "Relize is... have you ever been?"

"Coupled hundred times," Argrave nodded.

Melanie smiled. "Suppose that saves me some trouble."

"Things should be simple," Elenore continued. "Her family owns a warehouse. Once we're inside, we'll have to lay low. While Relize may not be hostile to us, as soon as our existence in common knowledge, we'll be the target of every family within the city—their ambitions, their hostility... this is still the north, after all. On that note, I think it's past time you caught me up to speed on what you wanted to do there."

"Sure," Argrave nodded, his gaze lingering on Melanie.

Elenore caught his signal. "Melanie, go and make sure everyone is ready to depart."

Melanie laughed—she wasn't slow-witted and knew why she had to go and make sure. "Alright. I get it. High-level talks, not fit for lowly ears."

She turned, the thin chains on her wrists dangling as she did so. Once she was gone, Argrave cast a ward and walked closer to Elenore.

"You're really alright, sister?" Argrave asked her at once.

"Can't afford not to be," she nodded. "Just had to... reframe things in my mind."

"Perhaps you ought to take a few more days before you jump back in," Anneliese cut in.

Argrave pointed to Anneliese. "She's rarely wrong about these things."

Elenore crossed her arms. "I'll have time. The road is long. For now, I wish to have something to occupy my mind, plan for the future. I won't forget what Levin is done. I need to reflect how this might've happened, avoid him outsmarting me as he did once again."

Argrave shrugged, admitting she had some point. "Alright. Well... you know about the Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption?"

Elenore lowered her head for a moment, lost in thought. Just as Argrave was about to explain, she lifted her head back up and said, "It was a mandate passed down by Relize's Grand Council. It barred people from buying the status of a patrician for their family."

"Correct," Argrave nodded. "Now, no matter how much money you have... there won't ever be any new patrician families in Relize. If you aren't a part of a patrician family, you can't participate in District Councils, nor can you be voted into a seat on the Grand Council."

Elenore nodded. "It was passed eighty years ago, as I recall."

"You really are a genius," Argrave marveled.

Elenore frowned. "You remember this just as well as I do."

"I didn't have a life," Argrave said to dismiss her point. "Back on subject, though... ordinarily, you'd think a measure to prevent corruption would be a good thing. But Relize—trade is its lifeblood, and meritocracy is its lifeblood. This Rescindment strips away a part of what makes Relize powerful as a self-governing city. There've been eighty years of stellar merchants who remain second-class citizens because of this Rescindment. Ambitious, wealthy people... who want the best for their families and want to participate in local politics."

"It's stagnating," Elenore nodded. "It's certainly a compelling theory... but what, you hope to overthrow the Grand Council with this merchant class?"

Argrave wagged his finger. "Not a chance. You know the Dandalan family? Its family head isn't blind to the city losing its edge. I think he'd be amenable to an alliance. We help him gain power, revoke this Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption ... he's got a powerful base of newly made, extremely wealthy patricians indebted to him. He's indebted to us." Argrave held his arms out. "All of the military and economic might of the wealthiest city in Vasquer is at our fingertips. And we get it all bloodlessly."

Elenore stood there for a moment, contemplating silently. "Much depends on this Dandalan family head. I'll need to look into him."

“I’m looking forward to it,” Argrave wrung his hands together.

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Chapter 257: I Decide

Argrave had been to cities in Vasquer like Mateth, Dirracha, Jast, or Parbon. They had awed him, but nothing could really be compared to Relize. Mateth, for instance, was one of the largest trading ports in the kingdom, and probably the largest city in the southern reaches. Even still, its population could not be more than forty thousand. Dirracha was probably near the same number. Jast and Parbon both had difficulties in terms of agriculture, so they were smaller.

Yet Relize... it was a tremendous metropolis. At a point, the cart that Argrave and his company were riding stopped to spend the night, and they had a chance to walk and stretch their legs. Even at that time the city had been awake, dancing lights illuminating its splendor in a subtle, almost mysterious manner. It did not have towering constructions like Jast, nor gigantic walls like Mateth. The city simply sprawled across so much land.

In the morning, the city was revealed in earnest. In the crispness of dawn, half-hidden by sea fog and half-revealed by the early suns, its grand gothic design made it seem like some sort of hidden city. Relize was a place of unimaginable wealth, and as much was reflected in everything down from its material: marble. It was a low-lying seaside city without a wall, wrapping around a great bay and split in two by a river that had to be as wide as the Nile.

Even from afar, one could see the pride of the city—its docks. It was like a continuous marble crescent moon laid flat against the coast, connecting all parts of the city to the bay. One could walk from one edge of the docks to the other, all on one flawless marble path that was probably five miles long. There were countless ships both coming and going from the bay, each of them bearing a multitude of heraldries on their sails. Argrave recognized one sail—six silver stars in a circle on a black field, all connected by a silver chain that converged in the center. It was the Dandalan family’s symbol.

Three gargantuan bridges connected the parts of the city split by the thick river, the largest of which was part of the docks. These bridges were elevated to allow passage for small boats on the river. These boats were plentiful—fishing vessels, vessels with shipments, vessels with other goods... to say the least, business was good.

If Argrave were to estimate the population, he’d place it at around two hundred thousand. Located in the center of northern Vasquer, access to the ocean, a large river with plenty of upstream agriculture... Argrave didn’t think he knew too much about geography, but he could tell why this city prospered as it had. It was a jewel that befit the capital of a nation. Its people were too fiercely self-governing to ever allow that to happen, though, and the Kings of Vasquer were content with their highly defensible city of Dirracha.

“Why are you gawking? Said you’d been here before,” Melanie asked, having walked up to Argrave as he was admiring the city.

“Long time ago,” Argrave shook his head. “It was...”

It was laggy. Place had too many damned NPCs in it. He couldn’t really say that, though.

“Shame we can’t wander,” Argrave looked at Melanie. “Running the docks, looking around... even the warehouses are gilded. There’s Felipe II’s summer residence, too. Nice place.”

“No place quite like it,” Melanie nodded. “You’ll be visiting the Scarlet District, I assume.”

Argrave’s face grew cold, and Melanie laughed at once.

“Guess you really have been there,” Melanie said, planting her zweihander against the ground. “They say every lord visits a brothel. Don’t worry—I won’t tell your lady friend.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you? Having grown up there and all,” Argrave jabbed, disliking her teasing.

This time, Melanie’s face contorted in displeasure, almost mirroring his own cold glare. Then, like it never was, she smiled. “Good comeback. Didn’t think a royal bastard could have banter. Wonder if it’ll last.” She ran her fingers across the plume on her tellerbarret. “Well, anyway, Elenore wanted to see you.”

Argrave felt guilty for his cruelty—he had always liked Melanie, and it was a bit uncalled for to bring up her past in such a manner. Anything regarding Anneliese made him have a short fuse, he knew. Before he could apologize, the mercenary woman was already walking away, seemingly unaffected by his cold words.

She’s important. Mends things, Argrave made a mental note. In a place like Relize, maintaining her loyalty would be important. Fortunately, Melanie’s rough-and-tumble nature wasn’t merely an act—he imagined she wouldn’t genuinely hold a grudge for what he’d said.

Shelving the issue for later, Argrave walked, searching for Elenore. He found her with the rest of his companions by a fire. As he approached, the princess turned her head towards him. The fire cast eerie shadows on her eyeless sockets, but by this point Argrave had gone used to her face.

“I’m surprised by you,” Elenore said. “Couple of days ago, you could barely walk. Now...”

Argrave rolled his shoulders. “Still feel a little off. But I’m black blooded.”

Elenore placed her hands on her knees and then rose. “Yes. Anneliese told me of it,” she nodded. “I... you’ve done a lot. I realized that long before we met, but now that I know the totality of it... having your heart replaced? I can’t...” Elenore lowered her head, then turned to pick something up off the ground. “Anyway, here.”

Elenore held out a sack to Argrave. He reached out and took it in his hands—it was something metal. Opening it up, a rainbow greeted him—their source was about five pink coins, and thirty other golden ones.

“Good god,” Argrave exclaimed, then quickly sealed the bag shut and looked back up at her. “I didn’t get you anything, I’m afraid. I still have that Vasquer mantle and crown, if you want it.”

“It’s pocket money,” Elenore said. “Told you I could turn a profit in Dirracha—I did. Salvaged my network, contacted old and new people alike. A few enchanters I do business with could use earth magic—shady businesses needed reconstruction after the riots and couldn’t go to the...” Elenore shook her head. “Sorry. Details don’t matter.”

“Pocket money,” Argrave repeated. Viewing her as a big sister seemed markedly easier when she casually unloaded this much gold on him. “Thank you. Not sure I’ll need it, considering we plan to stick together the whole time.”

“Best to be prepared,” the princess dipped her head towards him. “As for those enchanted items you entrusted to me—they’re enroute to a warehouse I own within the city, along with a manifest detailing what each does. My enchanters were quite excited about some of them. I’m sure we can sell those you don’t use off in Relize.”

Argrave smiled, then stepped forward and hugged her. She was surprised but eased up after a moment. “Lucky to have you with us,” he told her. “Don’t ever think I’m not grateful to you.”

“...yes, well...” she said quietly. “Get off me. I’m hot enough from this fire.”

Argrave laughed and pulled away, then moved to sit by the fire beside Anneliese.

“I think it’s well past time that you tell me what you withheld from me in that message to Vasquer,” Elenore decided, going back to sit in her spot.

Argrave’s happiness dimmed somewhat when he heard her words. “Yeah, you’re right.”

Elenore waited in silence for a few moments, then said, “So?”

“You’ve gotta ask,” Argrave told her. “I’ll answer what I’m asked.”

“He made me ask Anneliese,” Durran pointed at Argrave. Despite his earlier outburst at Therese’s coffin, things had been fine between the two of them since. “Looks like family gets special treatment.”

“I didn’t make you,” Argrave disagreed. “I politely requested you direct inquiries to Anneliese, so that she might give her perspective on this whole thing.”

Elenore put her hands on her lap. “How do all of you take this matter, this... ‘Heroes of Berendar?’”

Everyone grew silent. Argrave looked at each of them in turn, curious himself.

“Don’t care,” Galamon said first.

“Of course you don’t,” Durran nodded. “I don’t know. Way I figure it, it’s probably just some way of a god implanting a prophecy in someone. Doubt all that nonsense is real.”

Elenore turned her head to Anneliese beside Argrave. “And you?”

“I am unsure,” Anneliese said distantly. “I think I would enjoy finding the truth of the matter.”

“Me too,” Argrave concurred.

“I see,” Elenore said, nodding her head. “Well... it’s another day yet before Relize. All of my affairs are in order, and everything is set up for a smooth journey. And so... you will tell me everything, Argrave.”

Argrave looked into the fire, resigned to his fate.

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King Felipe stood before a giant mirror, his back straight. He wore black fine clothes, embroidered with golden snakes on the sleeves. Slowly, with his breathing heavy, he undid the bottom buttons. When the buttons were undone, he pulled the shirt away. It resisted slightly, clinging to something wet.

Beneath, there was another black undershirt. Felipe lifted it up, the fabric clinging to the wound beneath. It was not so dire a gouge—having penetrated not even half an inch on his stomach, it could be healed by magic near instantaneously. Nevertheless, he refused to have it treated.

The great serpent Vasquer, near synonymous with the founding of this country... she had sided against him. He felt her presence in his mind, felt the revulsion. His daughter, Elenore, and another... he thought it was Argrave, but the golden eyes the man bore made him uncertain. All of his royal knights had seen the serpent's rejection, seen her assault. On top of that... Levin had betrayed him, released a manifesto. Had the legendary Bat even been there? He could be certain no longer.

Felipe dropped the shirt and stepped away from the mirror. A young woman laid across his bed, naked body covered by purple sheets. She was asleep, and Felipe sat down in a chair just beside the bed. Felipe's gaze lingered on the wound in his stomach. He placed his fingers against it.

He had thought Levin might attack his brothers—expected it, even. But if there was one thing he hadn't anticipated, it was his betrayal. Dirracha's riches were gone, plundered. A great mass of royal knights left with the prince, and many others had seen Vasquer reject him. Orion was missing. Much of the north would follow Levin in forming his Kingdom of Atrus. The south would rally stronger than ever before at the divided north.

Felipe dug his fingers into the wound, pushing. All the while, he remained silent, eyes closed. When his fingers were knuckle-deep, he opened his eyes.

"It doesn't end like this."

He pulled his fingers free, a fresh wave of blood pouring out of the wound. Calmly, he reached for a goblet on a table beside him. He took a long drink, then set the goblet down. His gray eyes had a cold fire to them.

"It doesn't end like this," Felipe repeated. Then, he serenely set to work healing the wound on his stomach with his bloodied hand. "I decide how it ends."

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Chapter 258: Siblings in the City

"So... would you want to rebuild a world like the one you lived in once you're king? One of peace, personal freedom, great luxury for all—nearly post-scarcity, as you called it?" Elenore asked Argrave.

They were all once again on the grain cart, though having entered Relize itself, the smooth roads made for a nice ride. Argrave looked at his sister, thinking over her words in detail.

Argrave rubbed his eyes. "Anneliese asked me if I'd like to run away and look for answers about my situation once Gerechtigheit is stopped."

"Well?" Elenore tilted her head. "Which would you want to do?"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told her," Argrave lowered his hands. "We have to get there first, you damn dunce."

"Things advance with the passage of time. Great progress comes at unexpected times," Elenore said, tone distant.

Though Argrave was about to question, Anneliese drew him away, saying, "I cannot recall you calling me a damn dunce."

"I got much more—" Argrave began but was cut off by the cart shifting.

The shifting ceased, and eventually the cart came to a stop. The back doors opened, shining light down upon the five of them. Melanie stood there, waiting. Elenore's guardsmen swarmed throughout the warehouse, attending to various things. "Welcome to Relize, lady and gentlemen," Melanie greeted.

Elenore was the first to stand. "Excellent. Melanie—are the enchanted chests I sent for here? I want a place to store some of our valuables, like the regalia we retrieved."

"Saw some shiny metal boxes, so maybe," Melanie nodded, looking back.

Elenore accepted Melanie's help and descended down to the warehouse floor. Argrave made sure that everyone else had got out before he did so.

Elenore looked around at the wide-open stone warehouse. It was largely empty—there was plenty of space. "I'm going to have some beds delivered. I know it's not ideal sleeping in a shared area, but its best we minimize exposure to the streets. Inns are hotbeds for rumors. If we're seen, it'll get to all the people we don't need to know."

"Well used to sharing sleeping areas," Argrave held out his hand to stop her from continuing. "I appreciate what you've done."

"Alright," Elenore nodded, and placed one hand on her hip as she continued, "I have to take care of Melanie's parents—this arrival was abrupt, and they want some sort of explanation why their daughter is wantonly using their warehouse. Beyond that, I'd like to get apprised of the situation here in Relize, look into the Dandalan family, and possibly establish contact."

"Durran will be handling some things for me outside," Argrave said, placing his hand on the tribal's shoulder.

"I will?" he turned his head.

Argrave nodded. "Yeah. You're the one least likely to attract attention to all of us."

Elenore crossed her arms. "He was followed by Ruleo last time."

"Bit different, no?" Argrave raised a brow. "Just don't bring the glaive this time, Durran."

"How am I to protect myself?" he said indignantly.

Galamon pointed at him. "You're a spellcaster."

"I need a sidearm, that's what I need," Durran shook his head and sighed.

“Buy one,” suggested Argrave.

As Durran nodded at his suggestion, Elenore asked curiously, “Why do you need him to go out?”

“Just a little survey of my own. A promise for Galamon,” he looked towards the vampire. They were fast-tracking his cure, by this point. Relize, a populous city, was a naturally nice place for vampires to congregate, and some had. “Beyond that, I have an idea that might make us a lot of money, and I need to see if there are viable partners in Relize as I recall,” Argrave explained.

“Alright...” Elenore stepped closer. “Pitch it to me.”

“What’s the biggest limiter for enchanters regarding imbuing magic into enchanted items?” Argrave questioned. “What’s stopping them from producing thousands of items a day?”

“Magical capaci—oh.” Elenore paused, her brows rising. “Do you... know how to imbue? Your blessing matters little if you cannot do so properly. Imbuing is a difficult and time-consuming, art.”

“Elementary stuff. Did a little with Galamon way back in the day on glass bottles,” he looked to the elven vampire. “I can’t exactly break the world economy by releasing one thousand enchanted items onto the market, but I think it’s time to learn something new. I need to hone my magical supply, and this seems a productive way to do so. The burden lies on you, though. Getting inscriptions will cost plenty of money.”

Elenore turned around and paced for a bit. “Let me think on it while I take on tasks.”

#####

Argrave and company settled into Relize comfortably, even despite the fact that they were staying in a warehouse. Having Elenore on his side was such a huge boon that even Argrave felt briefly overwhelmed. For example, he recalled mentioning in passing that he would enjoy some chicken—before night fell, he had some.

Even despite the luxury afforded by having his rich big sister on his side, Argrave did not grow lax. He spent his time delving into the B-rank spells that he had not mastered, Anneliese acting as his tutor. He was worried he would be holding her back, but she claimed that teaching actually made her work harder at something—she felt she had to press herself to stay ahead of Argrave.

After the first day...

“You never told me the head of the Dandalan family was one hundred and fourteen years old,” Elenore said, interrupting Argrave as he read on his bed beside Anneliese.

Argrave took off his glove and put it in the book, then shut it. “Didn’t realize you hated old people.”

“No, what does tha—oh. You’re joking,” she realized, coming to stand over the both of them. “One hundred and fourteen years old, nearly sixty children, and an absurd number of grandchildren... it’s like some bad fairytale joke.”

Argrave placed one hand atop his book and sat up. “The man’s a B-rank mage, so he looks much younger than that. Seventy, maybe. He’s a... he’s a character.”

“He was the last beneficiary before the Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption,” Elenore continued. “You really think this man can help us?”

Argrave placed his elbow on his pillow and leaned against it, staring up at the princess. “He’s very good at hiding it, but I know for a fact his family is the wealthiest in Relize. The Dandalans are high in number, steadfastly loyal to their patriarch, and more than willing to marry for power. He profited tremendously from the Rescindment. He’d marry his children off to the wealthy in exchange for favors and money. They wanted their grandchildren to have patrician status, he wanted power. He made this thing into a cash cow,” Argrave shrugged. “Match made in a ledger.”

“I was going to bring that up,” Elenore nodded. “Given how powerful his family has grown from the mandate, would he really want to kill off his... cash cow?” she repeated, evidently liking the phrase.

Argrave pointed at her. “We’ll talk to him. I’m sure he will.”

Elenore took a deep breath. “I need to borrow Anneliese. I need her for something.”

“I need her for everything,” Argrave frowned. “Why?”

“I’ve secured a meeting with a Dandalan,” Elenore explained, waving her hand. “I’d like her to be there, gauge things. Won’t take long. Just passing on a written message.”

Anneliese placed her hand on Argrave’s shoulder. “I can be there,” she promised.

“I’ll go too,” Argrave decided.

“You should stay,” Anneliese disagreed. “You cannot risk being seen.”

“And you can?” Argrave rebutted. “She can?” he pointed at Elenore.

“I won’t be going,” Elenore shook her head. “Anneliese won’t even be visible. Ideally, she’ll watch with her bird. Gods, but you are a lovestruck fool.”

“And I’m proud of it,” Argrave said, then buried his head in his pillow. “Well... damn. Lonely afternoon, I guess.”

“In the coming days, my workload is to lighten. I’d like to begin talks about how you plan to approach this war,” Elenore informed Argrave.

Hearing those words, Argrave was reminded of the reality of what he was doing. “I’ll be there. Anneliese and I did come up with something.”

“That something may have shifted,” Elenore informed him. “I have it on good authority that the rumors of Levin intending to found his own kingdom are entirely true. The northern region of Atrus will split from Vasquer and form the Kingdom of Atrus. That’s most of the northwest. They’re bordering Veden on the Midwest.”

Argrave fell into deep thought, closing his eyes.

“This is something new to you?” Elenore pressed.

"The kingdom itself... No." Argrave rubbed his forehead. "No, the nobles in that region were always closely linked. After the civil war was won, and Felipe was killed... if it was the rebels that had won, that kingdom would form. It was one of many successor states after the balkanization."

"Balkanization?" Elenore repeated.

"That is... a separation of one country into several smaller successor states." Argrave opened his eyes. "I never imagined Levin would cause this much trouble. He's... he's convinced Felipe will lose. That's the only reason I can picture why he'd do all of this."

"It's not difficult to imagine why. I don't think he has a single ally remaining. His knight-commander is largely crippled. Even his royal guard must question his legitimacy after what we did," Elenore said, not able to disguise some measure of pride. "I'm thinking a riot may happen, end him independent of our actions."

"Orion is still around," Argrave reminded her.

"Still missing," she disagreed. "This kingdom of Atrus may yet prove to be a boon. I would much sooner face Levin than Felipe... and I may do just that." The princess let out a long sigh. "Even still, it is impossible to avoid anxiety. We make our move." She stepped away. "I ramble. I will send for you, Anneliese, giving you some advance notice of when I will need your aid. Until then."

"Take care, Elenore. Do not overtax yourself," the elf counseled.

"Take care," the princess repeated back, not addressing Anneliese's concern.

Argrave watched Elenore walk away. After she had long departed, Anneliese sighed.

"What?" he asked her.

"She drowns herself in work to bury her grief," Anneliese said. "She is just like you."

"More like you. Too smart for her own good," Argrave picked up his book, ready to resume reading.

"I know people better than you do," Anneliese asserted.

Argrave laughed. "Alright, take it easy. It was a compliment."

Anneliese pushed his book away from him. "I think this deserves attention."

"If she is like me... I turned out alright, didn't I?" Argrave leaned close to her face.

"Because I forced the issue," Anneliese said, giving a pointed frown.

Argrave paused inches from her face. "Well... you're going to be spending time with her."

Anneliese raised a brow. "This is true."

"I trust you," he told her, then gave her a light kiss and grabbed his book once again. "You tell me to do something, I'll do it. Just tell me how I can help."

"I will think on the matter," Anneliese decided.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 259: Establishing Contact

“What, precisely, do you experience when you use the bronze jewelry? I have heard you use the word ‘see.’ Is it similar to sight, or wholly different?” Anneliese asked Elenore.

Elenore observed the simply dressed snow elf across from her. Anneliese, just as Argrave, wore exotic, hardy gray leathers with protective enchantments along all its length—duster, pants, and shirt all. They had another black set of lighter make designed for travel in the Burnt Desert. Allegedly, the fact they matched was coincidental—Elenore wasn’t so sure.

The woman was rather like an unending river of questions. Upon examining the ostentatious, puffy way in which the people of Relize dressed, she had questioned Elenore of how such a thing came to be. She inquired about construction, ship craftsmanship in Vasquer, the size of the sea Relize neighbored, and now it had come to Elenore. Anneliese asked her questions with an open-minded curiosity that came without judgement, so it was difficult to brush them off.

“You may understand it as a sphere of perception around me,” Elenore described briefly.

She was not averse to answering questions—there was some time before the meeting with the Dandalan would come. They waited within the warehouse a fair distance from the meeting place in a private area so as to talk without fear of distraction. They had been amply cautious in setting this up, and now they merely needed to wait. Elenore wished to be able to receive firsthand reports from Anneliese as she observed things... among some other motives.

“I recall you mentioning being able to observe something hidden within a box without opening it,” Anneliese continued, amber eyes veritably glowing.

Elenore nodded.

The elven woman leaned a bit closer. “Does this extend past protective enchantments? Safes, vault, et cetera? Could you view inside those chests you brought to the warehouse, for instance?”

“Magic interferes, but does not block entirely,” Elenore shook her head.

“Can you perceive my insides? What I have in my pockets?”

Elenore crossed her arms. “Yes, I can. Why did you not try these things out when Argrave had possession of them?”

Anneliese leaned back against the warehouse’s wall, bringing one hand to her long white hair. Elenore observed her fingers move very adroitly, forming a braid. “I wish I had.”

Much of Elenore’s focus was devoted to Anneliese’s fingers as she braided. It was so practiced as to be habitual—Anneliese seemed capable of doing it in her sleep.

“You watch me braid, no?” Anneliese cut in.

Elenore, surprised, cocked her head back. “I... I was, yes.”

"I knew it," she smiled, pleased with herself. "Even despite your unusual manner of sight—if it can even be called so—the face retains certain habits."

Elenore didn't know what to make of that, but she found herself smiling back. After a time, she found her own curiosity rising. "Why do you keep your hair long? It must be a hindrance."

"Argrave likes it," she responded simply. "I do, too. But it's impractical, I agree."

"He asked you to keep it like that?" Elenore tilted her head.

"No. I merely know," Anneliese shook her head.

Elenore took a deep breath and sighed, ruminating on things in silence. She had come to trust Argrave more than she thought herself capable, yet the fact remained it felt like there was still a certain distance between him and his inner circle.

"I tried to kill Argrave the first time we met," Anneliese spoke.

Elenore came to attention, feeling like her mind had been read.

"You looked disheartened, so I thought I might share something," Anneliese continued. "We were enemies on the battlefield. I could tell at once something was amiss—he felt no hostility towards me. He recognized who I was. He wished desperately for peace. Nevertheless, I fired a spell at him with the intent to kill. Fortunately, he is quite skilled at fighting with magic."

Elenore grew silent. Anneliese put her finger atop the braid she'd made—it was two feet long, by this point—and unwound it all with a whisk of her finger.

"Did you... think about it? Does it haunt you?" Elenore asked.

"Yes. I brought it up with him. He had forgotten it," Anneliese laughed.

Elenore laughed too—that was the last conclusion to things she thought she'd hear.

"He's forgiving?" she pressed. "Has he ever... been betrayed, or at least felt betrayed?"

"Certainly. Durran's presence was... not without its issues. I would like to tell you of it sometimes," Anneliese continued. "Not just that—Veiden, the Patriarchate, everything."

Elenore was puzzled, and she rubbed her hands together. "Why? Is there something I should know? I received reports of Veiden military strength from Melanie herself—I know well the threat your people pose."

"I hope for a confidant. A friend," Anneliese smiled. "As much as I enjoy those I travel with, it is difficult at times to be the sole woman in a party of four. There are fundamental differences between us that are difficult to bridge."

Raising a brow, Elenore gave a slow and steady nod. "I imagine so."

"I am glad of it," Anneliese clapped her hands together.

"But let's not forget the reason we came here in the first place," Elenore waved her hand to caution Anneliese. "This meeting with the Dandalans is important."

#####

Melanie strode through an open door, passing by a servant who gave her a light curtsy. Anneliese thought the mercenary looked a lot smaller without the gargantuan sword she carried around. Anneliese viewed the scene from atop the mercenary's wide-brimmed hat, camouflaging her golden Starsparrow amidst golden plumes on the red hat.

The man waiting beyond the door looked to be quite old for human standards—if Anneliese were to guess, sixty, with a long white beard to match. The brim of his blue hat was remarkably even wider than Melanie's. He wore flamboyant clothes that puffed up on the sleeves and pants, varied red and blue stripes running along the lengths. His cuffs were frilly bolts of white, and he bore a rich-looking ermine collar. A black half-cloak covered one of his arms, bearing the six silver stars in a circle connected by a chain that was the symbol of the Dandalans.

Melanie came to stand opposite the Dandalan man, who himself stood just before a table. Chairs awaited them both.

"I have agreed to meet with the full knowledge of my family," the man began, "Though I cannot speak on behalf of my father, Leopold, I can convey whatever message you wish to get to him."

Anneliese directed her Starsparrow to lightly peck Melanie's head, signaling the woman to continue.

"No trap awaits?" the mercenary pressed.

"None whatsoever," he said with an indignant harrumph.

Anneliese bid Melanie continue once again.

"Well, do you have a name?" Melanie said, sitting down abruptly.

"I am the twenty-seventh son of my father, Ansgar," the man flourished his hat somewhat.

Melanie placed one hand on the table, leaning back into the cushioned seat casually. "Whole thing is a bit long. I'll call you Ansgar. You can call me Melanie."

Anneliese could tell Ansgar was actually amused, but he hid that fact very well—an experienced actor. He pulled back his seat elegantly and sat in one fluent motion. He stared Melanie down, making all of his actions deliberately slow. It took him near half a minute to settle in, his hands entwined before him on the table. Melanie remained unflappable.

"My father is a very busy man, miss Melanie. As the years pass him by, he delegates many of his business ventures over to the hands of his children—that is to say, myself and my siblings." Ansgar inhaled and let a silence hang. "Though I must note miss Melanie fits in rather well around here, it has not escaped our attention that you come with many people foreign to Relize."

Melanie reached down, and Ansgar followed her hands. She pulled out a piece of paper and slid it across the table, then set down a hefty bag atop it.

"Bribe. Message to Leopold. Don't bother wringing us for more," Melanie said at once. "Don't know why I sat down, frankly. Any questions?"

Ansgar eyed the two things placed before him, then looked back up to Melanie. A smile slowly split his stoic expression.

#####

“Always knew there was a reason I kept this,” Argrave said proudly, running his fingers along the golden fur that lined his collar.

These were the black and gold fine clothes he’d had tailored at Jast to attend the banquet. That banquet had probably gone the best out of everything he’d ever tried to do. He might as well call them his lucky clothes. Then again, it was like flipping a coin once and declaring it his lucky coin.

“There’s a hole in them.” Elenore reached forward and put her finger in it to demonstrate her point.

Argrave looked down, baffled. “How in the...? How could this happen?”

“Probably the fighting, the mountain-climbing, the desert-crossing, the swamp-wading...” Durran commented off to the side. “Take your pick.”

“Just let me have something tailored for you,” Elenore crossed her arms and sighed.

Argrave put a hand to his forehead. “Those puffy shirts and frilly collars here in Relize look ridiculous... this, this here is classy,” Argrave grabbed at his collar. “Well, whatever. At the very least, I get to see Anneliese in something nice.”

Anneliese shook her head as Elenore asked, “I had no idea you cared so much about this nonsense.” She shook her head and continued, “Anyway, I have some news. Levin is having a coronation. Invitations are already heading everywhere across the region of Atrus, so it’s not exactly hard to discover.”

Argrave frowned. “Seems he’s serious about this.”

“Thinking more on it... I think he wants to negotiate. Thus far, his intent is to disentangle Atrus from the battle between Parbon and Vasquer. It would line up with his character.” Elenore rubbed her hands together to warm them up. “Despite everything, he’s never one to want to lead.”

“Negotiate,” Argrave repeated. Some thoughts bubbled up. “And what are your thoughts on that?”

“It’s a good thing. It minimizes Felipe,” she said objectively. “Apparently, a great deal of Felipe’s core guard, ones I thought utter Vasquer loyalists, defected to Atrus. The king himself has remained silent, saying nothing... to the public, at least.”

“And you don’t...” Argrave began, choosing his words.

“No. I have no compunctions,” Elenore shook her head decisively. “I’ll admit, remaining at Vasquer wasn’t necessarily a bad move... but against Gerechtigheit, it’s more compassionate to be dispassionate. I didn’t get where I am being ruled by grudges. Going along with Levin, provided he does intend to do as I think, is the best path for the future.”

Argrave swallowed, realizing that the point Anneliese had made became more cogent the more he pressed the issue.

“The first signs of spring are coming in the warmer south,” Elenore continued, unaware of Argrave’s thoughts. “The Margrave’s most steadfast allies march to a large war camp in the center of the south. The upper echelons have not yet declared support for you. They fear you have ties to foreigners. I imagine you had designs for this?”

Argrave took a deep breath. “I kept them ignorant because I didn’t want Relize to be compromised. So long as I can get a message to Elias, tell him my plans... that should sway. Regardless, even maintaining neutrality is good enough. Once our army takes the field, they’ll collaborate. Common enemies, all that nonsense. Doesn’t matter whether they support me now or when the war is done—I can make it happen.”

“I suppose so. Failing that, if Duke Sumner is... well, never mind. We still have to discuss your strategy,” Elenore reminded him, “But I’m worried about this present situation. This Leopold is a no-nonsense man, by all accounts. He’s... well, he’s also very old.”

“There’s a reason he’s lived this long,” Argrave assured her. “He’s wise. He’ll listen.”

“It seems you spend half your words convincing us we aren’t all going to fail miserably,” Elenore tilted her head, the words said in sarcasm.

“Oh, I have my doubts,” Argrave shook head. “I just never voice them.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 260: Family Patriarch

Multiple servants pushed aside two gargantuan marble doors that marked the entrance to a vast estate. The place did not have a grandiose garden or a walkway that housed statues as Argrave had seen elsewhere. Indeed, it was quite compact, fitting in alongside several other markedly unique yet similarly ostentatious mansions. Innumerable patricians made their home along the riverside, and the Dandalan family was no different. To make one’s home beside the river was a matter of prestige.

Argrave glanced around the inside of the mansion. The marble on the floor had patterns marked—golden flourishes so well-integrated as to appear part of the marble. From the main hall, one could see the other three stories of the mansion, each and all overlooking the main portion just opposite the doorway. Several members of the Dandalan family looked down on Argrave, Anneliese, Elenore and Melanie. If this visit did not go well, their presence would surely be announced to the rest of the city.

Argrave grabbed the wide-brimmed tellerbarret with two fingers, adjusting it. Though he did not like the clothes that had puffed up sleeves and legs, he had to admit the hat was quite nice. He felt like some sort of desperado, dressed in all black and bearing a golden plume on his hat. A desperado or a pimp, he supposed.

The dress for women was not as bizarre as that for men. Melanie came as a guard, so she wore the same things as ever. Elenore looked nice, bearing a modest green dress that had gold markings at points. Relize was still the colder north, so dresses were not so exposing. And Anneliese... Argrave could hardly take his eyes off her. With her long white hair bound in a half-crown braid, her amber eyes shining even more brilliantly than the jewels of the same color lining her white dress... in Argrave’s eyes, she looked like someone right out of myth.

Their party of four stepped within the mansion, and the servants once again strained to shut the heavy marble doors behind them. Argrave felt quite exposed without Galamon and Durran with him for this, but bringing so many people might antagonize the Leopold in some way. It didn't matter too much, though—Anneliese had scouted the mansion thoroughly, and no one waited in ambush.

A prominent Dandalan family member, Ansgar, waited in the central hall before them. He stepped forward towards their group, and gave a polite, almost ritualistic bow.

"Welcome, princess Elenore. And—"

"If we go by status, you should greet the two beside me first," Elenore interrupted.

Argrave said nothing—this had been premeditated. If they were to present Argrave as the claimant to the throne, it had to be clear that Argrave was not a subordinate, and rather it was Elenore that was hierarchically beneath him.

Ansgar looked up and ran a hand across his long beard. "Then I offer my greeting to Argrave and his fiancée, and to the princess Elenore."

Argrave nodded. "Well met."

"I would take you to meet the patriarch now," Ansgar said formally.

"Lead," Argrave nodded.

The Dandalan bowed once again, turned on his heel, and walked into the heart of the mansion. Elenore held Argrave's arm with her own, still insisting she never expose the fact she was no longer hindered by her loss of sight. Ansgar, fortunately, was quite accommodating of this.

They headed down a long, straight hallway, right towards the opposite side of the mansion. Many of the Dandalan family had gathered here—Argrave could spot some similar traits in their face. The Dandalans had thick brows, did not seem to grow bald no matter the age, and were generally of average height. They all seemed to have angry faces, man or woman.

Argrave arrived at a familiar double door of dark wood. Leopold Dandalan was beyond. Ansgar stepped up, and gingerly knocked thrice.

"Enter," a gruff, powerful voice answered back.

Ansgar grabbed both handles of the door and pushed it open. At once, light from an open window peeked past the doorway. Leopold Dandalan stood behind his desk. Instead of a back wall, two large glass doors exited out onto a balcony that overlooked the river. The Dandalan patriarch did not seem to be much more than a vaguely angry-looking old man, his back slightly hunched from age. He had a well-kept white beard and kept his vaguely long hair slicked back with something that made it shine.

"Welcome," Leopold spread his hands wide. "Princes, princesses, come to the estate of a glorified bureaucrat with too many children. Come in, come in. Ooh—careful now, watch the head," he commentated as Argrave entered.

Melanie waited outside, stopped by Ansgar. The three of them entered.

“Look at this. All I get around here is angry faces, yet now two bright young ladies grace my halls like balm to a burn.” He ran a hand across his beard, looking to Anneliese. “Well, perhaps you are young—this one is elven, and one can never be too sure. Ansgar! Shut the door,” he commanded.

“Call if I am needed, father,” Ansgar said, shutting the door.

“They all say that,” Leopold shook his head as he sat. “If I do call, I suspect all of them will rush from the second and third stories, stepping over each other and causing more problems.” The man’s brown eyes jumped between the three of them. “Well, sit. No time for ceremony, politeness. One of you has broken their mandate to stay locked up in a little greenhouse, and the other is wanted all throughout the north for killing his brother. While I’m not sure how you got in touch with me so quickly, we’re well beyond the point of pretending we don’t know what’s happening.”

“I appreciate your time, Leopold,” Argrave said, the first to sit.

“Do you?” he scratched his cheek, staring down Argrave.

“Wouldn’t have asked to meet otherwise,” Argrave continued.

“Suppose that’s true,” he nodded, eyes unflinching. “You are a big one. And a High Wizard of the Order already. Would that half my children had your magical talent. And your fiancée... some more big people on the way, it would seem. Big people with strangely colored eyes. A good thing, you two breeding. There are enough dull-witted children in the world. You will be having children, I hope.”

Argrave smiled, reminded of uncomfortable meetings with his grandparents. “Maybe in the future, certainly.”

“Hmm,” Leopold grunted. “So, what do you want? Hope you don’t need ships. If you came all this way to ask me for passage on a ship, or to borrow my vessels for something... I’d have to question if you have water in your head.”

Elenore placed her hands on her lap. “You read our message. What did you gain from it?”

“I gained that you want to stir up this little peaceful trading city into a machine of war,” Leopold tapped the table. “Machine for *your* war against Vasquer, that is. You would think royally educated people, bastards or not, would know that war is bad for business.”

“Hardly a peaceful little trading city,” Argrave shook his head. “With the amount of guards you patricians alone have, you can rival any army.”

Leopold leaned forth, pulling free a toothpick and putting it in his mouth. “Eh... you’re right. Stupid Pedreddin twats tried to raid one of my ships, yet again...” Leopold took a deep breath. “Alright. What’s your bid? Not your offer, but your plan,” Leopold waved his hand, clarifying the word ‘bid.’ “Get right to it. No preamble.”

Argrave cleared his throat, running his words through his head one last time. “Relize is run by its Grand Council, but there is precedent for that body to be set aside in times of war or crisis in favor of an absolute leader. This is decided by vote. You’ve built up a large powerbase here in Relize—instead of going after prestige and status, you’ve been working with the merchant families who can’t obtain patrician status after the Rescindment of Profligacy and Corruption. I think you can be established as

that leader, and I think you can revoke the Rescindment. That would secure your future in Relize. And you would use your newfound position to help overthrow my father.”

“You would name me owner of Relize?” Leopold asked neutrally. “Its count? Or duke, perhaps, given its population?”

Argrave almost smiled—the question was a trap. “No. Relize will revert to its old system after the war is finished. The only reason Relize has become as large as it is stems from its mercantilist, competitive roots. I don’t think a hereditary position suits it.”

Leopold leaned in, pulling the toothpick out of his mouth. “You would not name me a noble?” he asked.

“Do you want that?” Argrave asked him.

Leopold stared at Argrave for a few moments, then cracked a smile, placing the toothpick back in his mouth. “Not of Relize, that’s for certain. This place would wither under an overlord, of that you’re correct.”

Leopold leaned back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. “...yeah. Yeah, it’s reasonable. It’s possible. People are scared—they want a leader. I’m respected, I think. Maybe I’m an out of touch, delusional old man... but I don’t think so. And you can pay people to respect you, despite what moralizers might say.” His brown eyes fell back upon them. “Issue here... is you three.”

“Let’s solve this issue,” Argrave suggested, and Anneliese nodded with him.

“The two of you... your claims are weak,” Leopold said bluntly. “Could fracture the realm further if you ever sit in the Dragon Palace. And sustained hostilities are *truly* terrible for business.”

“I’m the sole claimant here,” Argrave said. “And the south will support me. With Relize on my side, the war will be quick and decisive.”

“Saying something is so... doesn’t make it so. If that were the case, I’d be king,” Leopold leaned in on his desk. “All I see... is two very well-dressed exiles, and an unfortunate soul roped along with things.”

Anneliese smiled. “I consider myself a very fortunate soul. And I think you would be wise to consider all of what we have achieved even without significant backing.”

Leopold stared at Anneliese. “Awfully confident.” He leaned back. “Heartwarming thing to see, lovers-at-arms fighting against an old man’s words. Well...” Leopold sighed. “I am glad that Induen is dead. More of a bastard than you are, Argrave. Took thousands of gold from my pockets. And I’ve heard the tales of him. Killed your mother, I hear.”

“In the coming days, you’ll hear of an incident within the capital,” Elenore said smoothly. “Felipe’s legitimacy is at an all-time low. Orion is missing. Levin fractures the realm again, naming himself king of an independent realm of Atrus. Argrave alone can unite the realm. And of all living descendants, he is the best suited to rule this nation well.”

“Who decided that?” Leopold protested at once. “You’ve got...” his face slowly turned into a frown. “Yeah, I guess they’re all terrible. Or dead. Or insane. Eugh...” the aged patriarch rubbed his face. “I shouldn’t have to think about this. Why can’t you idiots just make a system that works? No succession issues, peace at all times?”

“Maybe we can work that out later,” Argrave suggested.

“You,” Leopold looked at him. “You want to be king?”

“I have to be. Too much is at stake,” Argrave shook his head.

“Hmm.” Leopold stroked his beard. “Can’t decide if it’s bad to want it or not. I’m not...” Leopold sighed, then shook his head. “I need to consult with my family. Don’t worry—ugly they might be, but they’re not stupid. I love them, and I will make sure they’re taken care of. In addition, I have some terms.”

“Name them,” Argrave gestured.

“I don’t need nobility. It makes us weaker, unambitious,” Leopold leaned in. “Key northern territories will fall under Relize’s rule—not my family’s. I can outline these for you later. They are, in my opinion, places that could be developed into trading hubs.”

“Until you outline, I cannot agree,” Argrave shook his head. “But I am amenable to the idea.”

“I’m glad you can’t, yet. Shows prudence,” Leopold nodded. “Alright... you’ll have to lift some restrictions on trade Induen imposed. My pockets are bleeding, here.”

“So long as they’re reasonable, done,” Argrave nodded.

“I’d like a bride of fairly high status,” Leopold continued.

Argrave narrowed his eyes. “For your children?”

“For me. I’ve still life in me yet, and my last wife died some three years ago,” he nodded seriously. “And not same ancient, 60-year-old widow. A woman to bear more children.”

Argrave grew quite uncomfortable at the prospect.

Before he could answer one way or the other, Elenore said, “I can see that done.”

Argrave cast a glance at her, but the words had already been said. With that, Leopold leaned back.

“Well... I have nothing else. It seems we’re in agreement. Talking with my family won’t take long—you may remain within my—”

The door opened, and Ansgar entered. “Forgive the intrusion, but I feel that, given present circumstances, the news must be delivered.”

The Dandalan walked up to the patriarch, who glared at his son but did not rebuke him. Ansgar leaned in, whispering. He stood straight.

“Given our talk... I assume the arrival of delegates from Atrus is beyond your expectation?” Leopold questioned, then nodded when he looked at their faces. “I thought so.”