

Jackal 361

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 361: Looking Into the Mirror

Argrave reached into his duster's breast pocket and pulled free a silver medallion. It was of crude make, with strange letters and a worn image of a woman pouring water from a horn. He twisted it between his fingers as he looked out at the gathering crowd of centaurs, using it to allay his fears. He'd felt it weighing on him the whole journey—a reminder of what was coming as constant as the bronze hand mirror.

When the half-man, half-equine race gathered in one place like this, they were intimidating beyond belief. Armored in steel, far taller than even men on horseback, and with bows that could fire arrows as thick as Argrave's arm... to say the least, it was easy to see why they rivalled the wood elves, forcing them into that ridiculously organized militarized society. The centaurs' bows were made for hunting giants—he didn't care to test how good Artur's enchantments were at deflecting their arrows.

"Why exactly did they scurry back home?" Argrave looked to Anneliese.

Anneliese stared ahead as she answered, "The elves block the entrances as we speak. The centaurs are deciding upon a course of action."

Argrave winced and said beneath his breath, "God damn it." He looked to Ganbaatar. "Might not get your wish."

"My wish?" Ganbaatar repeated.

"The centaurs and the elves might fight after all." Argrave looked away from the elf, thinking hard.

Ganbaatar shrugged. "I don't care if that happens. It's been happening for centuries. It's why we are as we are. Or have you forgotten that? You, who used my customs to gain my trust?"

"Speak respectfully," Orion reminded the elf, but Argrave waved at the prince to refrain from undue persecution.

Argrave placed the medallion in the palm of his right hand, then traced the rim of it with his left thumb. Finally, with his mind made up, he closed his palm. "Plan doesn't change. If fights happen, they happen. So long as I can make the world whole, it changes nothing."

"And if you can't?" Mina pointed out.

"He led us through that assault out there, didn't he?" Artur pointed out somewhat sycophantically.

Argrave stowed the silver medallion away in his pocket once again, closing it shut with a button he seldom used to ensure it didn't fall out. "For now... let's just get to the *root* of the problem. Grimalt, Rasten, Bastal—tell them to get ready."

Some people seemed displeased the king could make a joke in the middle of such tension, while others seemed eased by the pun even Argrave would admit was bad. Maybe a polarized reaction was the point, though, for Anneliese was the only who could see how nervous Argrave was about this next endeavor.

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Argrave felt some visceral satisfaction as he watched the Veidimen boost each other up to a high ledge one after the other. Heroes of Berendar didn't have too many of these moments in the game, but he remembered this one feeling particularly insulting. What was it, exactly? Why, a shortcut. Specifically, a shortcut that took the player from the end of the dungeon back to the beginning. He didn't mind using them, of course. He was simply always frustrated that having knowledge of them didn't allow the player to exploit them, heading straight from the beginning to the end.

Soon enough, it was his turn to be boosted up to the ledge. Once up there, Artur waited, suspended in the air as ever. He looked at Argrave peculiarly.

Argrave rubbed his hands together and sought an update, asking, "What? Have trouble with that door?"

"No, it was easy to remove the enchantment," Artur shook his head. "I'm simply wondering how you learned all of this, Your Majesty."

"And I'm wondering why you flipped one-eighty degrees on supporting my kingship," Argrave plainly said. "The important thing in both uncertainties is that it's working out for us. I'm happy with things."

Artur raised a brow, and his eyes danced with myriad colors. "It was never about you. It was about me, you see."

Argrave brushed past that, saying, "Well, it's about all of us now. King or peasant, you can die all the same when the end comes. We're all on the same level. That's what makes it a calamity—no matter who you are, it affects you." He looked to the side as some people pushed past the cramped crowd.

"Your Majesty," Grimalt greeted. "None of us can move the door, even with the enchantments gone and the armor bolstering out strength."

Someone scabbled at the edge, and then Orion threw himself up. He dusted off his armor—pointless, considering how battered it was—and then walked forward. "I'll handle it."

Argrave hastened to follow when Orion confidently declared he'd handle something. The people parted for him, revealing a stone door with ornate floral carvings. It had swirls and vortexes. Seeing the designs alone birthed nostalgia. The Veidimen struggled to open the door, using rocks to employ leverage or more simply scabbled at a grabbable spot with clumsy gauntleted fingers. Orion pushed them aside, then took his place.

First, Orion tried to pull the door open as they did. After a few moments of failure, he moved on to try using leverage. Almost immediately, the rock snapped. Orion stepped back, then looked at the rock still lodged firmly in the gap on the door.

Argrave began to suggest, "We can just—"

Orion raised his foot up and kicked, hard. The whole cave seemed to shake, and the door cracked and folded inward. It collapsed onto itself in two split slabs of intricately carved stone. The prince looked back at Argrave, almost proudly.

"That works," Argrave conceded, stepping forth.

As Argrave took his third step, he paused when he felt a rumble in the earth. He held the wall to steady himself, but the shaking was even more intense by the wall. It wasn't a shaking, per se—instead, it was like a bunch of sharp tremors echoing out through the earth, their source... above.

And then, the path that had opened up caved in with deafening cracks, and Argrave crouched down to shield himself. Grimalt stepped beside Argrave and conjured a ward above. It proved unnecessary—only what was beyond the door caved in. Dust filtered through their group, setting some into coughing fits as they inhaled fine particles.

When it was all over, Argrave stood up straight once again and sighed. "Well..." he closed his eyes, thinking of the longer path that he'd need to take. Suddenly, he opened them again, their grayness alight with fire. "We're taking this path." He walked forward, then crouched. He picked up the first rock. "It's principle by this point."

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It took a long, long while to clear the way, even with Vasilisa, Moriatran, and Artur aiding with earth magic. Argrave wasn't sure if taking the regular path would've been quicker. Even if the regular path had been years quicker, Argrave wouldn't have taken it. It was the principle—doing things for the sake of doing them.

But the better answer was that it was far safer, too. No enemies, no centaurs, no nothing. Quick and easy, right to the heart. But the reason that Argrave was so nervous about this endeavor was quite simple—he was putting a theory to the test.

After a couple hours of careful excavation, the path was clear enough to walk without moving more rocks aside. The Veidimen took the lead, scouting things out. They entered a great circular stone chamber with a high ceiling and a strange altar in the center. It was difficult to see the walls of the room, for the roots of the redwoods pushed past the stone and curled around various circular mosaics. At points, the roots seemed to be stopping the building from caving in.

The Veidimen filtered in first, looking around the room. Next came Argrave and the Magisters. Argrave stepped right past them, heading for the altar. He came to it and leaned on it. It had a great depression in the center of it, making it seem like a big wash basin. Ganbaatar caught up to Argrave, staring down with him.

"This is one of my people's holy sites, certainly," Ganbaatar confirmed. "That altar isn't familiar, but at times we visited a place just like this. Still, I don't see how you're going to make this get the elves to the bargaining table. The Holy Army of the Wind is the only Tumen in the Bloodwoods that still follows the gods. Most have lost their faith. Even if this becomes known, it won't—"

"Shh," Argrave raised a finger to his lips.

Argrave's Brumesingers scrambled up to the altar, the four of them peering down into it like it was a pond they didn't dare jump into. He felt their fear through his link, and by extension Anneliese stalked up behind them, her arms crossed as she watched with worry.

"...let's see if I'm right about what Gerechtigheit is doing here," Argrave said. He held up his hand, a spell matrix whirling. It completed, dissipating into nothingness.

The Brumesingers trembled. Slowly, they started to cough. Argrave felt pained as he watched them hack and cough, and his fingers gripped the edge of the basin altar tightly. After an unpleasant while, one of them lowered its head and seemed to retch. A golden mist seeped out its mouth, so rich it was almost like honey. The gas seemed thick and heavy, and it slowly settled into the basin.

Argrave stared, incredibly tense. Ganbaatar was watching all of this, and he inquired, “What exactly are you doing?”

“This place was made by the elves but used by the centaurs... your people weren’t always enemies, you know,” Argrave looked at him.

“That’s nonsense,” Ganbaatar shook his head.

Argrave sighed and looked back. “Believe whatever you want... but the centaurs made sacrifices to these altars in the distant past. Offerings of life. I’m giving these things a substitute—souls. And I’m praying it works, too, because the alternative is very uncomfortable.”

And even if we do try the alternative—sacrifice—that might not work, Argrave recognized.

As they talked, all four of the Brumesingers continued to puke this golden mist into the basin of the altar. It spread out, pooling inside. As they coughed, the black Brumesingers lost some shade in their fur, turning from jet to a lighter black. They were expelling the souls they ate, and so losing some of their power to project mist.

For a long while Argrave’s hope dimmed like the flame of a candle with its lid placed back on. Then, the roiling gas stopped moving, almost as if seized by something. Argrave immediately cast a spell to command his Brumesingers to stop. Anneliese stepped closer, transfixed, as the mist grew denser and denser and settled into a hazy, honey-like liquid.

“Hmm...!” Argrave restrained fierce laughter as his grip tightened on the basin atop the altar. “I knew it. I knew it, you sly bastard.” He looked at Anneliese. “I was right. Gerechtigheit was doing something that he did down in the old dwarven cities, with the Ebon Cult. He’s helping gods escape earlier so they can ruin this place, make it impossible for us to mount an effective defense.”

Artur looked at Argrave, particularly focused on what he was saying. Moriattran stepped up to the altar and looked down. “Not sure what we’re looking at.”

“You’re looking at a portal to another realm,” Argrave explained. “This thing shouldn’t be able to open, not now. But since Gerry is meddling, making the boundary between realms weaker... it can open. It can open half a damned year before it ever should have.”

“Another realm?” Orion looked into the golden portal.

“Another realm,” Argrave nodded. “One side has giant trees. What do you think is on the other side of the mirror?” Argrave asked with a smile. “I’m glad your knees haven’t given out, Moriattran. This is a big step up.”

Argrave gathered up his foxes and put them back in the pockets inside his clothes. Then, he raised one foot up to the altar, ready to step up.

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“That’s your solution?” a centaur with long black hair trotted up to his ally, standing eye-to-eye with the other. “Do nothing? Do nothing until they’ve buried us all in the earth, leaving us here with no food? The Mother has given us iron here to forge steel, and flat land to seek refuge, and a peaceful place where we might gather... but food is to be earned. Such has always been Her message. We cannot stay. Every child must eventually leave their mother.”

The centaurs were large and proud, and yet this mention of motherhood resonated with all of them. Well over ten feet tall, each and all carried bows far taller than themselves, other weapons dangling from their backs where a saddle might lie on a horse. Their arms were as thick as redwood branches, yet despite their unwieldy bodies there was a civility to their dress. Their legs were armored, and largely hidden by draped cloths that covered their backs. Their hooves had shoes just as horses did—theirs were spiked, so as to gain purchase on the ice or the ground. Their human torso, too, was kept hidden by armor and clothes both, and doubly so for the women.

“If you want to engage the enemy in those root-ridden forests and fall on your side like a fool, be my guest,” the other declared, not backing down. “We cannot thrive while the forest is overrun like that. I’ve made my clan’s stance clear—we should focus on one area, clear away the roots there.”

“We have nothing to fear,” a woman declared, holding her arms wide. “Each and every day, the ice revealing the Mother grows clearer and clearer yet. This is the disaster before the Deliverance. The elves’ gods have abandoned them—and now ours return. We see her, sleeping even now. The ice grows clearer, melting every day!”

“Melting?” one centaur crossed his arms—one of the biggest of them all. “That the Mother is more visible means nothing. Even with more of us here than ever before, the ice does not grow weaker. Perhaps a demonstration is in order.”

The centaur reared back mightily, raising his armored hind legs into the air. They slammed down powerfully, sending a great echoing noise throughout the cavern. People stared at the sight of impact, watching.

“It remains unbroken,” the centaur who’d caused the impact said confidently.

As people stared, they started whispering among themselves and pointing. Soon enough, the demonstrator looked between everyone, confused, and then looked down. He studied the sight of impact, but the ice remained impeccable as ever. Then, movement caught his eyes. He squinted... and then changed his angle to get a better look.

And what he saw... he could make no sense of it for a moment. In the ever-still grasslands beyond the ice, there was... movement. Living movement. And not the Mother, not the animals... but people, hundreds of them, walking about without a care. They stepped across the steppes with reckless abandon.

So much was said by so many in the moments following this discovery that it was impossible to discern a consensus in the crowd. But one... he stood still, staring with hateful, shocked eyes at the black-haired leader of the moving people below.

“Matesh... what does this mean?” someone pulled him from his daze. “You’ve seen the gods of other lands and been to their realms. What does this mean?”

Matesh started to breathe quickly, then looked back to the black-haired leader. Their party moved in the direction of the Holy Mother Sarikiz. And as memories of the past surfaced... he felt a dread greater than anything else he'd ever felt before.

"That man..." Matesh muttered, then repeated louder, "That man. In the golden armor, there. He is known to me."

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Chapter 362: Stepping Outside

"This isn't the same continent," Argrave explained as his people looked around the vast open grasslands. "This isn't even the same world. This is a different realm. Bridges between our realm and others can only form in specific, connected places—in this case, the bridge was that of a mirror image. On one side, trees as tall as anyone can imagine. On this one... only this," he declared, spreading his arms out and gesturing about.

As far as the eye could see, brown-green grass spread out endless across largely flat plains with a few hills no taller than a few feet. There wasn't a single tree or plant anywhere within sight. The only disturbance was various altars like the one they'd come from, the animals frozen in time, and Sarikiz, the centaurs' Holy Mother. Above, the sky was a sapphiric blue. Argrave's eyes wandered above, searching for a sun or a moon that he knew would not be there. Though the centaurs could see past the mysterious ice to glimpse this land, the same could not be said on the opposite side—it was a one-way window. Perhaps they stared at Argrave even now. He didn't know what they'd make of his presence. It didn't matter what they thought, though.

Back at that altar, each of Argrave's party had taken turns getting into the basin of the altar filled with the souls expunged by the Brumesingers. As a display of confidence, Argrave had gone first. The experience was bizarre. After he dipped his body into the liquid, it was like falling asleep while driving, and then waking up only when the car slammed into a wall. Not as devastating, naturally, but after entering the golden pool the only thing Argrave remembered next was blinking his eyes open, standing here. And one after the other, all came through.

Everyone was having very different reactions. Orion removed his golden helmet and let his long black hair flow freely as he walked about in a daze. The Veidimen were the least fazed of all... yet a great many of them lost their discipline and wandered, touching and smelling the grass in confusion. There were animals strewn throughout this land, frozen midstride as though locked in time. The Magisters tried to take this development with dignity, observing their new surroundings with curiosity... but Argrave didn't need Anneliese to tell him they were shocked to see it writ on their face.

Orion pushed his boot against one of the pigs, yet despite his tremendous strength the thing didn't budge an inch. He looked to Argrave, confused and alarmed. He looked like he sorely needed guidance.

"Time wastes while the forest dies," Argrave decided, clapping.

"Gather up!" Grimalt shouted, drawing everyone's attention. The Veidimen were brought back to attention, and everyone else was spurred forth by the snow elf officer's intimidating voice.

Argrave nodded once everyone was ready. "We're in no danger, not here. I don't intend to use this place as anything more than a junction, taking us where we actually want to go." He turned his eyes to

the distant sleeping Sarikiz. “So you can relax, somewhat. Don’t tempt fate, but don’t think the world is out to get you. Let’s go, all of you.”

With that, he walked fearlessly towards the resting god. Anneliese was the first to join by his side, keeping pace with him. Soon enough, everyone moved to follow.

“How in the blazes did...? What is this, Grave?” Mina asked as she struggled to keep up. “That... that woman ahead, are we going to...?”

“We’re going to split up into five groups,” Argrave said loudly, ignoring her question. “Grimalt, Bastal, and Rasten will lead three, Anneliese will lead the fourth, and I the last.”

The people behind Anneliese and Argrave started to falter as they grew near the giant Sarikiz. He could not blame them, exactly—even he balked when seeing that her foot alone was far larger than he was. It was one thing to know that she could not wake up yet, and it was another to test that theory. After all, much had changed.

“This place gives an opportunity to move quickly through the forest unmolested, so long as the entrances are not found. Even if they are found, I can’t imagine the elves would be eager to dive in.” Argrave paused, looking back at the pausing group. “Hell, when they see Sarikiz, they might want to turn tail as you seem to want to. We’re going to use this place as... crossroads, I suppose.”

Ganbaatar was the first to break past the fear, followed by Artur. “Five groups,” the elf said. “Will we open all of the portals to the different altars, then?”

“That’s correct. And then each of you will prepare something for me.” Argrave said, turning back and walking forth. They walked around her legs, heading for her head. “I know what you’re thinking—all of you don’t have the same pets I do, and you can’t open the altars. Well... look at this, will you?”

Argrave walked past the shoulder of the sleeping giant, to the head. Her face was tilted towards them, and her breathing carried wind out like a steady bellows. Being so close to her brought some trepidation, but it was nothing compared to the prospect of his idea to use the altar failing, and he’d endured that fine. Her dreads of golden, glowing hair cushioned her head. If counted, they would be sixty. Argrave stepped towards her face—specifically, he stepped towards the roots of her hair.

He cast a simple D-rank spell of blood magic, calling upon the silver bracer on his arm to supply the blood. Once he had a blackened red dagger in hand, he regarded Sarikiz cautiously and knelt down, cutting through the hair with the tool. It cut through quite easily, and Argrave watched with morbid curiosity as the blood seeped into the edges of the hair, staining it.

Once cut, it fell to the grasslands soundlessly. Despite being severed from the source, her golden hair still shone with light. Argrave hefted the weightless blood dagger and said quietly, “Drag that away.”

Argrave stepped after the Veidimen as they hesitantly dragged the long braid of hair away, each of them casting uneasy glances at the sleeping giant. “Listen carefully. The five of you are going to haul the pieces of hair I give you to the altars. You’re going to place them in the basins, and then you’re going to burn them. This should open things up fine.”

Nikoletta had gathered up to listen, yet her eyes stayed focused on the sleeping mother. Argrave said annoyed, “I know you like blondes, Nicky, but focus. This is important.” At his words, she turned back,

miffed and nervous at the same time. Argrave changed the subject once again, continuing, "We're going to be doing something very dangerous. Gerechtigkeit has made the borders between realms here very thin. He's deliberately expedited things. Now, something strong enough to poke through the thinning fabric *has* poked through, and it's posing a major problem."

Argrave walked to the dread and began measuring out the size of the pieces he was going to cut. "Now, before whoever breached into this world takes the Bloodwoods over completely, we're going to do something very simple. We're going to open the floodgates." He stuck the knife in a spot and began to cut through it delicately.

"All of the old gods of these wood elves... we're going to wake them up." Argrave grunted as he kneeled. Anneliese ran her hand across the dread, her curiosity evident. "We're going to take them to our realm, and we're going to set them loose."

"Hold on a moment," Vasilisa interrupted. "Are you just trying to make the situation more chaotic? How does this help us?"

Argrave stopped cutting, then reached into his pocket with his left hand. After a moment, he pulled free a silver medallion. "Recognize this? Of course you don't," he said before any could answer. "It's the medallion of inheritance for the Lord of Silver. I kept it on a lark, but it has a very nice purpose here." He stowed away the medallion once again, almost out of fear it might be lost. "Some people say in diplomacy... that it's not about how smooth your tongue is, but who you know and what they're willing to do for you. I don't think the elves we just fought can rightly protest if one of their gods thought long departed vouches for me." His eyes refocused on another. "Sorry if this mellows the importance of your role, Ganbaatar."

Orion stepped up to Argrave as he worked at cutting apart the hair. "But what of safety? *Your* safety?"

"Not concerned for yourself?" Argrave mused, not looking away from his task. "You're a capable knight-commander. You'll be with me. But the real danger comes from the A-rank ascension I'm going to attempt. The risk is a bit mitigated in the spot I intend to perform it, however." Argrave waved his hand dismissively.

"Your Majesty... are you saying we're also expected to converse with..." Grimalt said cautiously, hands arranged before him politely.

"Oh, no," Argrave waved the dagger to dismiss the idea. "Just me. I'm the only one talking, here. And I'll be speaking to the elven god of flesh and blood."

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"...and lastly, Argrave disappeared into the golden portal. All of his allies followed shortly after, and I could not follow," said Onychinusa, lying down on the floor as she spoke in unwitting defiance of common mannerisms.

The emissary of Erlebnis did not seem to care what she did. It was remarkably normal in all but its face, which had two large eyes and a mouth alone. One of the eyes was missing, revealing a reddish-mercury portal. It looked down upon her and repeated questioningly, "Could not?"

Onychinusa blinked. "He entered a portal into another realm."

“And you were barred how?” the emissary pressed calmly.

“By fear of death,” she said in shrill defensiveness.

“We see.” The emissary crossed its arms, and the reddish-mercury portal disappeared. “Our Lord has no further use for you at this time. Depart back home. Wait for another mission.”

“Those elves in the forest...” she began, eyes closed. “How could *they* come from my people? Those pale giants, too?”

Onychinusa waited for an answer, but none came. When she opened her amber eyes again, the emissary had departed. She leaned up, looking at the shrine to Erlebnis. Her face distorted in dramatic anger—she was unused to managing her facial expressions.

“Home...” she muttered to herself. “No.”

With that last word, she dispersed into black magic smoke, dispersing through the environment.

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Chapter 363: Irreplaceable

“Be careful,” Argrave told Anneliese as he held her hand. “I think it’s pretty well-established you can take care of yourself, but I always hate sending you off.”

“I know. You want to protect me.” She leaned in and kissed him. “But need I remind you... that you still have to catch up to me?” With a cheeky smile, she turned away and walked off, and Argrave’s hand slid off hers. “So, go do that. And *you* be careful.”

Argrave chuckled and smiled, watching as she walked away. When he turned back, his party was waiting. It was the smallest, yet perhaps the most potent—Artur, Vasilisa, Orion, Ganbaatar, and some of the first people he’d met on this realm... namely, Nikoletta and Mina. He’d changed a lot since meeting the two of them. And maybe they’d changed, too.

Orion carried a glowing section of Sarikiz’s dreaded hair, bound in a red rope that made it look like magical wheat. Artur relaxed on the grassy ground, staring up into the sky nonchalantly. Mina and Nikoletta talked amongst themselves, and Vasilisa caressed her forehead as though she had a headache. Ganbaatar seemed eager to move.

“You two are probably wondering why I wanted you with me,” Argrave said, directing his voice towards the ducal heir and her good friend. “Well, it’s simple. I didn’t want you to think I’d forgotten about my promise to ask the elves to search for Duke Rovostar and your father.”

Nikoletta looked surprised, and she crossed her arms and said quietly, “That’s... benevolent.”

Argrave stared at her when she gave that response. Things had changed, he was realizing. Now that he was king, people called basic human kindness ‘benevolence.’ All he was doing was what he thought was right. Maybe that had never changed.

He rolled his shoulders to dismiss his thoughts and said, “Let’s go.”

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As they walked across the grasslands, Argrave found himself very out of sorts. Galamon, Durran, and now even Anneliese were absent. He wasn't quite at ease with Orion yet, and though he liked Vasilisa well enough he'd yet to build the same rapport he had with his mainstay companions. And as they walked...

"Might I steal a moment of your time, Your Majesty?"

Argrave looked to his right, and then far down to spot Artur's shaggy head of brown hair. The Magister had expended much of his magic reserves in the fight against the wood elves' Tumen and had asked them to slow so that he might walk with them—his enchantments drew from his magic supply, after all, and he needed that to replenish.

"Steal? Didn't take you for a thief," Argrave said lightly, giving a non-answer.

Artur laughed, though Argrave didn't think his own joke was particularly funny. When he settled, the Magister cleared his throat and said, "I'm going to be blunt, Your Majesty, because I don't think you care for delicate speech."

Argrave spared the stunted man a glance, then turned his head back to the grasslands ahead. His cynicism flared, telling him that now was the time the cost of this man's favor showed up on the balance sheet.

"I have a certain fondness for delicate speech," Argrave admitted. "It's saved my life a few times. And now I'm going to go talk to a god again—I hope I have a talent for it, as I think I do."

"Again?" Artur repeated.

"Never mind that," Argrave shook his head. "Say what you want to say."

Artur focused his eyes on Argrave. They were strange eyes—sometimes gold, sometimes green, sometimes every color one could conceive. It probably had something to do with his A-rank ascension.

The Magister said seriously, "I hope that Your Majesty will allow me to create an institution subordinate to the crown, focusing on rediscovery, research, and development of new enchantments."

Everyone in their small group save Ganbaatar turned their heads at this declaration. That was a significant statement, to say the least. Argrave took a long time to think about it before he said anything—time which Artur spent patiently waiting.

After a long moment, Argrave responded slowly, "The Order of the Gray Owl does that already. Technically, they're supposed to have a monopoly on all magical knowledge... but such a thing is almost impossible to enforce, given the autonomy of each Order member. Still, it has prevented other rival magical organizations from popping up in the kingdom." Argrave turned his head. "...given the request, I imagine you want me to change that."

"Yes," Artur admitted. "I would prefer to be completely unrelated to the Order. I think that, in the years to come, the title of Magister won't have much weight to it anymore. And I think you're to blame, Your Majesty. You know things. This journey here is enough to demonstrate that."

Argrave took a deep breath, thinking. He hoped to delay the conversation and joked, "Well, we still have to talk to a god, first. Might not make it out of that alive."

"I can guarantee Your Majesty that the armor you wear has no modern equal," the Magister continued, unwilling to allow himself to be diverted. "And as more and more relics of ancient civilizations surface... I can make their secrets mine, I'm sure of it. Physical enhancements, sight in darkness, resistance to poison or disease, or things like that silver bracer on your arm," he pointed up to Argrave's wrist. "If you allow me, I can give all of that to the crown. All of what you know, I can bring to life."

Argrave listened patiently, then let the silence hang as they walked towards the distant altar. Argrave could hear their boots cutting through the grass as his mind thought of the matter. He didn't think Artur was overselling his abilities.

"Why?" Argrave asked. "What's your angle?"

"I think Your Majesty would realize the value of such an organization... and investments would be made," Artur said diplomatically. "To do away with delicate speech—money. Money, manpower, resources, and—"

"Power," Argrave finished.

Artur looked at Argrave for a few moments, and then back to the grasslands ahead. "I suppose you could call it that, yes. But... no. No, I don't think it is that. All I want is something very simple. I want to ensure that no one can disregard me. Or, as it was put to me recently... *look down on me*," he finished with bitter emphasis.

It was moments like these that reminded Argrave why he preferred to go everywhere with Anneliese. That sounded a plausible enough answer, but Argrave couldn't tell what the man was really feeling.

"I heard about what happened to you on the day of the royal summit," Argrave said quietly. "If you intend to get back at the Order... I'll say only that I intend to promote development so long as it doesn't come at the expense of another."

"As I would expect of a king forged as you were," Artur nodded like that was expected. "When I was young, I learned something. My parents were farmers in the farthest northern region of Atrus, just beyond the southern border of the old Queendom of Quadreign. Farming was tremendously difficult work, and doubly so in that region of cold, infertile fields. They had no use for a child like me. With this stunted body of mine, I was incapable of so much of what they needed—stout labor, endurance, general physical capability. I learned, then, a simple lesson. If they did not need me, why feed me? To fill my stomach... I had to be needed. Irreplaceable.

"Without my body, I had my mind. I took up administration of taxes in the village. The tax collectors veritably extorted the villagers who were ignorant of how much was in a single bushel—this was long before Felipe's conquest of the region. I was... ten, perhaps? From there, I took on more and more... I became literate, helped people with trade, learned medicine... it was a life of constantly striving to fill roles that were needed. It was only at thirty that I learned I had a talent for magic. It felt like a blessing beyond compare..." he closed his eyes. "But even having learned so late in life, I made it here."

Argrave listened curiously, having never heard this backstory before. He knew Artur was from a peasant family, but not much more.

“The point is this, Your Majesty. You might balk at hearing my motivations for founding this institution, but if you allow me, I will become an irreplaceable help to you. I’ve been doing it my entire life, after all. I didn’t wallow in self-pity. I would have succumbed to starvation long ago if I had. I can be what you need.”

Argrave finally reached the altar, and he put his hands on the altar as everyone else gathered around. *If being needed was all that mattered to you, would you have advanced so far?* That was the main question he could think of, but he didn’t want to ask it. There was no need to alienate the man.

“Who do you need to be needed by, at this stage? You’re an S-rank spellcaster,” Nikoletta pointed out, voicing Argrave’s thoughts for him.

Artur regarded her with a glance, then looked back to Argrave in expectation without answering her.

Argrave leaned against the stone and watched. “Anneliese has a similar sentiment about self-pity.”

“Her Highness?” Artur raised a brow.

“Yeah,” Argrave nodded. “I hear what you’re saying. You’ve proven yourself many times over in that engagement back there alone. But it’s not my sole decision, anymore. You’re on the parliament—you know I intend for a future where it has more importance in day-to-day governance of Vasquer.” He looked at Orion. “For now, we take care of all this. And when the time comes, your proposal will be put to the parliament.”

Artur looked briefly disconcerted, but he gathered his composure quickly and wrung his hands together as he nodded. “So it is, Your Majesty. So long as you know my will, I am content for now.”

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Argrave blinked open his eyes. He had returned to the realm he’d come from, standing there on stone like he’d always been there. Back in the grasslands, it had been a strange experience to watch something that looked like hair burn and turn into liquids. Sarikiz had the souls of sixty tribes trapped in her hair—though perhaps trapped is the wrong word, for it implied that it was not a willing thing. Regardless, it suited their needs for bridging the gap between realms.

Argrave cast a simple spell to illuminate the place and threw it up into the air so that it might bathe the room in light. This new stone building was much the same as the first underground altar they had entered in many ways. It varied in two ways—namely, the fact that there were many more entrances, and the fact that it was flooded with blood. Argrave lifted his right foot up and looked at it, grimacing as thick, congealed fluid dripped off his boot like visceral sludge.

Orion and the rest soon emerged from the portal, blinking open awake just as he did. Orion’s hand went to his sword at once the moment he saw the room lit by spell light. “Easy, now,” Argrave told him. “Might be you swing at one of the others coming from the altar.”

“What in the gods’ name is this?” Orion asked, stepping up to a slightly elevated place where the blood had yet to reach.

“It means one of two things,” Argrave said. “It’s going to be far less challenging to rouse our friend, Chiteng... or he’s already woken up.”

Orion looked uneasy. “What does that mean?”

“I’m not quite sure,” Argrave said distantly. “All I know is that it smells terrible in here.”

As more and more came through, he explained to each of them what was happening. When they’d all gathered, Argrave waded through the thick, viscous blood flooding the underground altar. He’d thought going through the wetlands of northwestern Vasquer had been torturous, but to walk through heavy red blood was far more unpleasant. Fortunately, the source was not too far from them.

Ahead, there was a circular rock wreathed in roots. The blood flowed down the plant life almost artfully, yet it all began from the stone. The rock was unadorned and unmarked, yet blood flowed in three places. With two side and by side, and one coming out from a crescent between and below... the simple, circular rock looked like a face bleeding from its eyes and mouth.

“Ganbaatar and Orion—I think you’ve already agreed to come with me to the elven realm. As for the rest of you... what do you think? Who wants to go?”

Artur had elected to use his enchanted mantle to hover above the blood once again. He asked tentatively, “Will you hold it against me if I decline, Your Majesty?”

“If I did, I’d never say that,” Argrave shrugged.

“Then I think that I will take my chances and gracefully decline,” Artur tipped his head. “So long as the opportunity is open, of course.”

“I’m of a like mind,” Mina said. “I like being ignorant of the divine... and if it’s not the divine and you’re wrong, I like staying out of whatever you intend to stick your hand into.”

Vasilisa stepped forward to join Argrave. “Whatever. I’ll go,” she told Argrave, fully committed to this endeavor even despite her crassness.

Nikoletta stepped forward, too, though offered no commentary. Argrave raised a surprised brow but didn’t intend to dissuade her. She and Mina exchanged some urgent and muttered words, and then the two parted.

“Right then,” Argrave nodded, turning back to the bleeding-face stone. “I suggest the rest of you back away a far distance, lest you get caught.”

They backed away obediently from the shrine Argrave stood before. Back at the other shrines, those four separate—and far more numerous—groups would be taking much simpler actions. Gods of other realms could be called upon using collective will and intricate knowledge alone. That method could be likened to lighting a fuse. Here, though... Argrave simply intended to light the bomb personally.

He retrieved Fellhorn’s inheritance medallion and held it up to the bleeding-face stone. Orion handed him the next items—a mallet and stake. The Veidimen had used these to make their tents, but Argrave had a different purpose for them here. He secured the medallion in place with the stake, feeling a deep sense of nervousness regarding what he was about to do. In Heroes of Berendar, items with divinity like this inheritance medallion could be destroyed before the shrines of deities. That was the sole way the player had to interact with many of the other realms.

He was fairly certain this would work... but if his method was incorrect, he'd anger Fellhorn for no good reason and look a fool before plenty of important people. But he'd been both a fool and a king, and the two had their ups and down. He pushed the spike against the silver medallion, pulled the hammer back, and pounded. On the first, it bent. On the second, it sunk in deep. And on the third...

A loud *clang* ran out as the medallion snapped in half. The noise was far too loud for what had been done, and the two pieces of the medallion tumbled down while releasing black smoke, before plopping into the blood at Argrave's feet. It hissed audibly, and slowly... the inanimate liquid began to bubble, churn, as though boiling. No, it didn't *seem* to be boiling. It *was*. Argrave lifted his feet up as he felt a heat in his leg.

A great hand formed of blood pushed up beneath them, sending them into the air. Argrave saw five spirits in each of the hand's fingers and knew then that he could resist if he so wished as he had done with Onychinusa and her shamanic magic. But now... now, he didn't care to. The great hand's fingers clenched, almost as though to crush them. And then they were elsewhere.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 364: No Man is an Island

Argrave heard a loud, deep rumbling *noise* echoing across the land, almost like a foghorn. He could feel it through his whole body. It shook the metaphorical cage around his head, and it was only after a few seconds that he remembered to open his eyes.

As far as the eye could see, a great red ocean twisted and cast waves upon the shore just as the real ocean might have. The sight brought back memories, and he urgently turned his head about as he remembered what he'd been doing. Orion, Ganbaatar, Vasilisa, and Nikoletta had all come with him. They looked around in panic. They were on an island of some kind—a tropical island, perhaps, though the trees had bark that looked like flesh and the flat, wide leaves were red and veiny. He might've called this a hellscape, yet the bright blue skies gave life to the grim place it sorely needed.

"Take it easy. Don't do anything stupid," Argrave told them at once. "We're in the land of the elven gods, now. Most specifically, in Chiteng's section of it."

The deep horn split the air once again, shaking the very earth they stood on. It seemed louder this time. Everyone turned their head towards its source. And when they saw it...

"My..." Nikoletta trailed off, stepping away in fear.

Ganbaatar knelt down in the sand, lowering his head in deference that seemed strangely bitter and shocked. Orion walked to the shore, staring ahead in protective defiance of Argrave. Vasilisa took her place by Argrave's side. And as for him... he simply beheld Chiteng.

Deep in the heart of the ocean of blood, a blocky throne stood strong, rising from the deep. It was made of rich, radiant ivory, and tall as a mountain besides. It had to be tall to accommodate the giant elven figure resting upon it. Like all of the wood elves, he had blonde hair and red eyes. Garbed in only a crimson robe, Chiteng slouched on his throne decadently... or decrepity. His limp arms seemed to be the only thing stopping him from sliding further down, and his feet were hit by high waves all too often. Still, his eyes... they saw. He was alive, without question. And unlike Sarikiz, he was awake, too.

A whale swam away from the throne, every so often rearing above the surface and letting out that haunting call that sounded all too similar to a foghorn. It seemed made of the same ivory as that throne, yet still it swam without issue, coming closer and closer and sounding louder and louder. As Argrave saw the size of it, he wondered if it was the cause of every wave in that vast ocean.

“Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale...” Argrave said as awe and fear both seized his heart. He stepped ahead as its horn call dominated all thought, standing at the shore with Orion.

“Your Majesty... be careful,” Orion cautioned, but Argrave only waved him away.

It became abundantly clear as it approached that Chiteng’s whale was far larger than the island they stood on. When it came close enough, its great horn call stopped, and its ceaseless swim forward slowed so that it might land harmlessly by the shore.

Eventually, it settled by the island, its great broad head looming over them all. Up close, despite its terrifying nature... it had a beauty to it, Argrave couldn’t deny. It looked more like a marble sculpture than a living creature, yet it moved and bobbed with the waves every bit as alive as any whale he’d seen.

The whale waited, and waited, and waited. Argrave knew what had to be done, it was simply about mustering himself up to the task. Gradually, he swallowed. “I offered the spirits from the ancient god Fellhorn as a gift. My hope is that it aids you in the years to come, as Gerechtigkeid descends upon this earth.”

No response came from the whale. It floated there, its great tail barely moving behind it as it waited.

“I hope to ask of Chiteng two boons. The first... I believe it wholly amenable. In this realm of the elven gods, the forces permeating here rejuvenate the body, making death a difficult prospect. I hope that I can enjoy the benefits of this realm as I ascend to A-rank.”

The whale didn’t move... but Argrave saw from people’s reactions that Chiteng, the distant god, did. He could not see past the whale, but he stepped aside and craned his neck just as the giant elf slammed his fist upon his throne. The ocean began to rumble, and a door rose up, settling along the shore. Argrave stared at the door. It looked like the same ivory as the throne—given Chiteng’s sphere of influence, it was likely made of bone.

After witnessing it, Argrave looked back at the whale. “...I’m assuming you’re telling me I can leave when I like.”

There was no answer in return. Argrave supposed that so long as he didn’t receive a clear refusal, the answer was yes.

“I thank you for your grace,” Argrave dipped his head. “Then... for the other matter. I ask that you forgive my hubris, but I must make a suggestion to you and the other gods of this realm,” Argrave said delicately, leaving pause for a blunt refusal. When none came, Argrave continued. “My subordinates travel to the other ancient altars, rousing each of your family in kind. My hope... my hope is that you will accept my direction in the conquest of another god already laying waste to your worshippers’ homeland, and further unite my kingdom and the elven society against the true threat.” Argrave finished quickly, lowering his head in deference.

From afar, a deep, guttural laugh echoed throughout the land, louder than even the whale's horn call. Chiteng laughed, he realized. The god sounded amused, like a child had said something funny because of its ignorance. Argrave kept his head bowed and lowered, hoping that amusement did not spell anger. The gargantuan whale backed away from the shore, sinking deep into the ocean and fading away into redness.

It's over. He won't hear me out. Despair crept into Argrave's chest. Yet then... the whale pushed against the shore, moving aside the sand with its broad head as it crept towards Argrave. It seemed liable to split the entire island, and Argrave took a step back in fear. Orion grabbed Argrave, prepared for anything. Yet the whale settled before them, waiting.

Argrave stared down at the whale, expecting further movement at any time. His breathing was a bit quick. When he looked up, the elven god he saw was vastly different from the one he'd seen moments ago. He was still slouched, yet his hand had moved to his temple, and he tapped his finger and stared... expectantly, Argrave realized. Impatiently.

Once he realized what was asked of him, Argrave exhaled loudly, gathering himself. He tried to step forward, but Orion stopped him.

"What are you doing?" the prince asked urgently.

"Let go, Orion," Argrave directed with a calm he did not feel inside. "We're going to be taken closer."

Ordered so blatantly, Orion obeyed and released his grip. Argrave stepped atop the whale, feeling its dense blubber beneath his boots. Just as it began to rumble... the prince joined him atop its broad head.

"Are you sure?" Argrave asked him.

"I must protect you," Orion confirmed. "You are my brother and my king."

With that, the whale slowly backed away from the shore, keeping its body as level and steady as any cruise ship. Slowly, slowly, it rose up out the water, turned, and began to swim towards Chiteng. The elven god of flesh and blood waited, his red eyes fixed upon the two of them.

The lone call of the whale had been a haunting thing from the shore alone, but as Argrave and Orion sailed out deep into the open sea that call of theirs became more numerous. A faint red mist shielded one from seeing too far, so the harrowing noise of distant foghorns penetrated the bloody ocean's fog as the giant Chiteng watched on from above, staring.

"No matter what happens, I'd ask that you stay quiet," Argrave said. "It's safest for both you and me."

He waited for an answer, and then looked to Orion when none came. The man stood there quietly, his helmet in the crook of his arm, watching Argrave silently.

Argrave caught on—the man didn't intend to speak, just as he'd directed. "Good. Thank you. Both for being here... and for being cooperative." He looked back up to the meeting that awaited them, eyeing the red-robed elven figure.

Now... how was he to persuade a god who'd laughed at his idea? It seemed a very difficult proposition.

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 365: Coalition of the Unwilling

The god of flesh and blood, Chiteng, filled the role of a god of fertility primarily. Men were intended to pray for virility. Women were intended to pray to prevent their children from being disabled physically or mentally—specifically, they prayed that the flesh and blood of their children was sculpted to be both beautiful and strong. Supposedly he made the figures of all men and women. All the elven gods took sacrifices, but Chiteng supposedly used the bodies to craft their children inside their wombs.

When Argrave looked back from where they'd come, he could see the shore no longer. Soon enough, the blocky throne of ivory came into view past the fog. It had been difficult to see from so far away, but there was a small white harbor leading to an entrance with a door well familiar to Argrave. The whale swam up alongside it, planting its broad head against the smooth stone. Argrave and Orion stepped up onto it. When they looked back at the whale, it sunk into the deep and disappeared before their eyes. Argrave wondered what else was lurking beneath in the deep beside that whale—the player could never swim in there. He didn't care to find out now.

When he looked upwards, Chiteng peered down at the two of them. He seemed to exert pressure with his gaze alone that almost made Argrave want to drop to his knees. Perhaps it was just his size, but maybe there was something more to divinity than mere power. Argrave felt entirely a fraud calling himself 'king.' But he did call himself king, and that came with certain responsibilities. So, he had to begin.

"Are you interested in an early victory in the struggle to come?" Argrave asked boldly. Though he felt intimidated standing closer to the divine figure, the fact he had been brought here suggested there was some leeway he might have.

The god leaned forward until he hunched, placing his arms atop his knees. He said nothing, but only stared at the two of them, waiting and watching. Orion shifted uneasily, and Argrave gave him a glance, pleading that he would do nothing to provoke Chiteng.

Argrave looked back up at Chiteng. "I was able to reach you because Gerechtigheit is targeting the region, specifically. He's bearing pressure upon the Bloodwoods strong enough that an ancient god has been able to enact its will on the land itself. This has destabilized the situation tremendously, and if left unchallenged, the forest itself will die—the forest that you and your family made for the elves."

Chiteng tilted his head from one side to the other, still listening.

"The god that comes is a fell being strong enough to be the first to break through the division between the realms," Argrave continued, speaking slowly and clearly so that his nervousness did not cause him to stutter. "Whoever it is clearly has no interest in cooperation—they intend to destroy the forest to make way for their domain. I can give you an advantage in this situation. With my presence on the mortal realm, I can facilitate the connection of realms and position your family to strike back against—"

Chiteng laughed once again. Every time his guttural voice echoed out, the harbor they stood upon shook. The great god leaned back on his throne and laid his head back, chuckling. Slowly the laughter faded away, and taking its place was the constant sound of deep horn calls pushing out from the fog as Orion and Argrave stood in uneasy silence.

“I’m not suggesting you hunt and kill an elder god,” Argrave finally started to speak again. “But if someone sticks their hand through a hole, they only have themselves to blame when their limb receives an injury from those already present. And if you think me incapable of actually doing what I claim to be capable of... know that I opened the altars to the centaurs’ great steppes using Sarikiz’s hair, and that I know the location of your holy artifacts—the spade, your father’s mattock, your sister’s sword. I can use these to manifest them. I can make good on my promises—I swear on my soul.”

Chiteng silently watched Argrave, all the mirth drained from his elven face. His hand clenched around the armrest of his throne, and then his lips parted, saying two words that echoed across the entire ocean. Two words, yet one name.

“Kirel Qircassia.”

Argrave took a deep breath when he heard that name. Anneliese and Argrave had come to the conclusion that it was an elder god behind all of the trouble in the Bloodwoods—nothing else could come close to that kind of power. They were wrong, as it turned out. It wasn’t an ancient god. It was *the* ancient god.

Humanity was not alone in conceiving the idea of unity against the threat of Gerechtigkei. It was a stage of opportunism for the gods, true enough. But just as some people sought protection under Argrave, some gods sought protection under other gods. Kirel was the self-proclaimed eldest god, who allegedly had been through the judgement cycle hundreds of time before. To be fair, the claim was not in question—many with old ties to Kirel supported that claim and obediently fell under his banner—the Qircassian banner.

The principles were simple—those who took the name of Qircassia had total autonomy, but they had to fight together against Gerechtigkei and all outside threats. Infighting was strictly forbidden. Beyond that, they were free to do as they pleased. It was nothing more than a defensive coalition. When its founder and enforcer was Kirel, a force in and of himself, a defensive coalition was nothing to balk at in the free-for-all Gerechtigkei enacted. It was stability in insanity.

It would certainly be laughable if a mere mortal wandered into your domain, claiming to have the key to deal a crippling blow to the leader of a divine faction that had persisted for many of the cycles of judgement. Argrave didn’t think he was wrong in claiming what he’d claimed—that the elven gods, working in tandem with true presence in the mortal realm—could expel Kirel. Making some roots overturn the earth and suck up saltwater was potent, relatively speaking... but it was a drop in the pond compared to what Kirel was *truly* capable of. He wasn’t fully manifested. They could push him back before he did.

Argrave turned away from Chiteng and stared out across the ocean of blood. There was no problem with Argrave’s plan. The problems would come later. The problems would come when things *really* got bad, and when the full force of the Qircassian Coalition had come to recognize Argrave and his godly allies as those who had cut off the grasping hand of their founding member. The gods had long memories... and unforgiving vendettas. Argrave and the elven gods were one blip on the radar to them.

He listened to the pleasant sound of the waves battering against Chiteng’s throne of ivory as the whales let out their calls, one after the other, in endless ambience. Argrave was running down his list of favorite curse words. He could remember more than he usually could. Even if he had been prepared for this...

persuading Chiteng? Persuading all of the elven pantheon to go after the heaviest hitter? Even if he told the elven gods that he knew both their favorite color and who they had a crush on, his knowledge about Heroes of Berendar paled before the overwhelming might of the Qircassian Coalition. Knowing how a gun worked didn't stop him from getting shot—it just told him to stay away from the line of fire.

Kirel usually appeared overseas, on another continent, Argrave reflected. If he's here... when the time comes, all his crony godlings will come and make Berendar their territory. If I know that's coming, I can prepare better. I can position us to take the least of the impact. We'll... have to submit to them. If we're lucky, we'll be dealt a good hand. Maybe I can influence the way things shake out. For now, we have to fortify Vasquer for the collapse of the Bloodwoods. It's going to be devastating. God damn it, why...?

As a total defeat settled over Argrave, some words came to him.

I saw countless people that, when faced with one tragedy, turned it into five or six by weakness of will. Self-pity does nothing for no one. No matter what comes, you cannot pity yourself.

Anneliese's words rang in his head so clearly he could practically feel her breath on his ear. He wished that she *was* here. But she wasn't. And he couldn't allow this one setback to turn into a spiral toward oblivion because he was weak.

Argrave turned around and looked back up at Chiteng. He was glad the god did not speak much, then—it gave him ample time to choose his next words carefully.

"I think this situation is rather funny, too," Argrave began with a disciplined calm brought by near a year of constant hardship. "Maybe you think that you'll be allowed into the Qircassian Coalition, to fight against Gerechtigkeits side-by-side with all of the other members. You think there might be some loss of life, but if you submit you can mitigate the damage. If your family submits, you might not gain as much as wish... but you can survive."

Argrave stepped slowly down the harbor, heading toward Chiteng. "But Kirel has already staked his flag in the Bloodwoods, and already made the trees your family grew obey his will. His emissaries are already fighting your worshippers to claim their territory. You and your family have no ties to the coalition—I can't imagine Kirel even knows your names. Forget allowing you to subsist in his ranks; the raiders already pillage and plunder what existence you eked out fighting against the centaurs and the giants in the last cycle of judgement. Why would he stop to negotiate when he can simply have all you own for himself? He is powerful, well-connected... and so why should he respect anything you wish to happen? After all... this is the cycle of judgement. No one would balk if you were shattered and consumed."

Chiteng slowly leaned forward once again, whatever amusement he'd shown entirely vanished.

"If you want to make it through this... so do I," Argrave continued, coming to a stop as he stared up defiantly. "And I'm not content to sit by and let every god flatten this continent. The cycle of judgement determines who is worthy of surviving another millennia, if any at all. And in the coming years... you and yours are just as mortal as me and mine. So, let's cooperate."