

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 17: Theory to Reality

Moonlight filtered through the poorly boarded windows of the abandoned house, leaving long slivers of orangish light across the decrepit floorboards. Argrave sat on a table, gazing up at the red moon with tired eyes. He was growing used to the strange sight, if only just. Across from him, Galamon was tidying up their preparations. He was carrying the bulk of things—glass bottles filled with viscous liquids, pouches full of tools and all the like.

Soon, everything was ready. Galamon took a moment to ensure he had not forgotten anything, feeling his axe, his dagger, his greatsword, and his bow. Once he was content, he locked his white eyes on Argrave. “We are ready.”

“I’m not,” said Argrave. “Thought I could reach C-rank magic. I suppose I was big-headed.” He shook his head lightly and stood. “Well, no use moping. I don’t think we’ll lose.”

“We can retreat if we do,” Galamon pointed out. Argrave was not sure if he was trying to comfort him.

“If we retreat without killing Tirros, it’s rather pointless. We have two lose conditions, the way I see it; Tirros escapes, or we die. If he escapes, he’ll just relocate alongside whichever Veidimen druids are left alive, and I can’t really find him again.”

He spoke of the matter very casually, but Argrave was a mess internally. Certainly, if this was ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ he would have complete confidence in his success. He had faced greater challenges in-game, primarily for fun. Now, the former NPCs around him were living, breathing people, and he himself was not some player-controlled avatar devoid of mistakes. He had fear, doubt, inexperience—all of the symptoms of impending failure. But could he stop? The mirror in his pocket said ‘no.’

Argrave grabbed a small satchel and a knife, slinging both to his leather gear quickly. He drank the contents of a vial on the table, and he was visibly reinvigorated—his pale skin returned to a semi-healthy pallor. “Ant venom stamina potions—disgusting,” he said, moving his mouth to get rid of the taste. “Let’s go.”

Galamon threw on his Viking-like helmet, and the pair left the abandoned house. It was perhaps an hour before midnight, but the streets of Mateth still had many people moving about. Most were sailors, coming to the city after long voyages over the turbulent

oceans. Though some dubious people prowled the streets, the two were not troubled by anyone on their way to the gate. Argrave watched for pigeons, but he could see none.

The moon was close and bright, and they had very little difficulty seeing the way.

Argrave left the gate closest to the coast—the same one he'd taken to go to Erlebnis' shrine. The guards on duty watched with tired eyes but offered no greeting or questions. They broke off from the road, heading towards the forest, but they followed the edge of the trees without entering the forest proper. Once they came to a river, Argrave crossed, delicately walking over some exposed rocks.

Once Galamon reached the other side, Argrave pointed to the distance, where a mound of rocks sat at the bottom of the beginning of a mountain. Trees rose up the mountain towards its peak, decorating its entirety with green. One could faintly make out the river pouring down from the headwater in the mountain.

"See those rocks stacked up?" He kept his finger straight.

Galamon followed Argrave's finger, and then nodded.

"They stack up in a rough circle, but the inside is hollow. You can vaguely see some trees growing out," Argrave explained. "That's where they are. There's a crawlspace they enter through, but we'll have to climb up the rocks for our purposes. I know a good route."

"Scouts?" Galamon questioned.

"At midnight, they convene to discuss their findings. That's why we left so late at night—to sneak in far enough to deal with those scouts."

Galamon nodded. Argrave took a deep breath, and then moved towards the mound of rocks in the distance. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on the spot that the scouts usually stood. His heart sped up until it was as fast as a hummingbird's. He had come this far due to reliance on his game knowledge, but this was different. If he was off, the entire operation would go bust.

Argrave could not spot anybody in the scout's post, but he still felt uneasy as they approached. He motioned for Galamon to follow close behind, and they started to shamble up the rocks. His legs shook, but he kept his focus as best he could. The climb was not especially difficult, and Galamon gave him aid where he could. Nonetheless, Argrave was still very weak, and the climb taxed him more than he cared to admit.

Once they were near the top, Argrave tentatively peeked his head over the mound of rocks, examining the pseudo-valley below. It was crowded with growth—fungus, shrubs,

and trees, but distinct paths had been carved into the landscape by frequent travels, like a game trail. There was a makeshift construction atop the rocks—a simple platform of wood planks with a ladder leading up to it, and railings preventing anyone from falling too easily. It had been covered partially with moss, evidencing it had been here for some time.

Argrave climbed up the last bit of rocks, needing a slight push from Galamon to crest the top. He climbed onto the wooden platform, crouching low and looking out across the druid's hideout. The trees, mostly oak, had thick leaves, and it was difficult to see particularly far. That was probably to their advantage.

After beckoning Galamon to come closer, he whispered between labored breaths, "We climb down the ladder. Then, you draw your bow. Prepare an arrow with the paralytic poison—the Whitesand Spider and Crawlroot brew."

"Why paralytic?" Galamon questioned.

"The druids are all connected to each other's animals in a grand network, with Tirros at the center. If one dies, the connection is severed, and they feel it."

"Hmm," Galamon grunted. "You go first. I'll prepare the arrow while you climb down."

Argrave briefly resented Galamon for telling him to go first—he felt like he'd just been pushed into a roller coaster—but he complied, heart pounding. The ladder was sturdy, and Argrave had never been afraid of heights. He was most afraid of being seen. He felt as though, at any second, an arrow would pierce his back. His legs trembled from fatigue and anxiety both.

When his feet met the ground once more, Argrave could not be gladder. He slunk off into the undergrowth, ears perked for any sound. Galamon followed closely behind him, landing as quietly as one in plate armor could. He walked to Argrave and crouched down beside him, nocking the arrow in his bow. It shone in the moonlight with the amber poison they'd prepared.

"He'll return soon, I think. Can you shoot him on the platform?" Argrave questioned.

"Wait till he climbs up?"

"Why? To hide him? We can stash him beneath some shrubs."

Argrave heard a crack above them and looked up in a panic. A rock fell down from the top of the mound, landing in the undergrowth. Argrave stared at the spot it came from intensely, staying deathly still. Eventually, when nothing further came, he answered Galamon's question.

"You're right. Not sure what I was thinking." Argrave shook his head. "When he comes by, be sure to hit him in a non-fatal spot. Not the neck, the head, or the heart. The poison slows the bleeding, so other than--"

Argrave paused, hearing something in the distance. The sounds started growing louder. Argrave cast a D-rank illusion spell, [Chameleon], that would keep them hidden so long as they did not move. Galamon drew the bow back, his breathing steady and solid.

The Veidimen walked into view. It was a woman. She wore battered leather armor that was the color of tree bark, but it was covered with scratches from branches and shrubs. Argrave was briefly taken aback that it was a woman, but he steeled his resolve. Man or woman, he had long ago decided to do this today. The decision, though, was not made by him.

Galamon exhaled and released the bow. All Argrave heard was a *twang*, like a guitar string broke. The elven woman jolted back and fell, exhaling as though she'd been winded. Galamon and Argrave slowly rose to their feet and then walked towards the spot.

The snow elf vainly clutched at the arrow in her shoulder, sputtering. Her eyes were locked on the two of them. Slowly, her contractions became more infrequent, and she was still, hands wrapped around the arrow. No blood flowed from the wound—the effect of the poison. Argrave focused on the objective facts to distract himself from what was happening.

"It should last for a few hours. By then..." Argrave trailed off. He hid his mouth with his gloved hands. He was shaking. It was getting better, but it was still there.

Galamon grabbed her legs and pulled her into an area with dense undergrowth, breaking some greenery and tossing it over her to better conceal her. Argrave peered ahead. In the distance, the trees began to thin up. The moonlight fell onto a more open area. There, most of the druids would be sleeping.

"Come on," Argrave whispered. "There's an elevated spot that gives a good vantage point. We should start the assault from there. We'll be able to stay hidden for longer."

Argrave led Galamon through the undergrowth, taking great care to step quietly. They came to the spot he mentioned—Argrave even recognized some trees in the exact same location as they were in the game. In a small clearing below, the druids had established a small camp of uniformly built wooden structures not much better than tents. As they were scouts of Veiden's military, they had rigorous schedules; they would all be asleep at this time in preparation for the next day.

Tirros' building was by itself, far removed from most of the other constructions. Argrave motioned to Galamon, and he came closer. They came to the top of the hill, hiding behind some denser bushes as they peered out across the camp.

Argrave reached into his satchel and pulled out some glass bottles full of a roiling black gas. The edge of the glass was inscribed. Glass could hold enchantments. Argrave only knew E-rank Inscription and Imbuing, but he could add simple spells to glass bottles. He added an illusion spell to them: [Muffle]. When they broke, they would do so soundlessly.

“Are you sure you can throw these accurately?” Argrave whispered.

“Yes.” Galamon took two of the bottles from Argrave’s hand. “Do you want them on the building or near it?”

“In front of the doorway would be best,” Argrave said. “That building there,” he said, motioning towards Tirros’ building, “is Tirros’. Don’t throw the gas near it. Everything we need is there—the scout’s maps, their assessment of defenses, and some very valuable books.”

Galamon threw one of the bottles without warning, making Argrave’s heart leap out of his chest. It landed squarely where Argrave had directed, and some of the gas spread out across the ground in front of a shack without a sound. Galamon threw the next, and then motioned for Argrave to hand him another. He hit all of his throws near perfectly, barring one, which hit the wall of one of the shacks.

“Now, get the Ebonice arrow,” Argrave instructed.

Galamon removed the quiver from his back, searching for the arrow that had a blue strip on its center. He pulled it out and then slung the quiver back behind him.

“When I ignite the gas, Tirros is sure to come out. He may be with someone else, but I doubt it. Just in case, do not shoot anyone but Tirros with that arrow. Tirros has gray hair and a long gray beard.”

Galamon nodded. He appeared so calm in that moment, despite the fact that they were about to face around twenty druids, including Tirros, alone. Argrave envied that.

“The druids’ animals are being held over there,” said Argrave, pointing opposite them. “If you hit Tirros, they’ll probably never arrive, as the center of their druidic connection helps them all communicate. If not... they will arrive quickly. They’re mostly wolves, but they have some bears,” Argrave recalled. “Not many for attack. Most of their attention is dedicated to those pigeons.”

Galamon nodded again. He nocked the Ebonice arrow into his bow but did not pull it back.

“Alright. Time for potions...” Argrave reminded himself. Galamon retrieved one brew, but Argrave reached into his satchel and pulled out two glass bottles.

He downed them quickly. One was a stamina potion; the other was a potion that calmed and focused. They tasted terrible. The effect took a moment to happen, and then, it felt like tendrils of ice were spreading throughout his brain. His body stopped shaking, and he felt reinvigorated.

Argrave held his hand up, calm as he'd been in months. He held his hand towards the first of the four shacks. He cast a simple, slow-moving elemental spell at D-rank: [Fire Pulse]. A ring of fire burst from his palm, drifting through the air slowly. He swept his palm to the left, then cast another.

Soon enough, four rings of fire were drifting through the air. Galamon drew his bow back, aiming it at Tirros' shack. The [Fire Pulse] moved ever closer to its target. Argrave watched it, holding his breath. When it was just feet away from its target, he saw some movement in the corner of his eye.

Someone poked a head out from one the shacks, scratching their eyes. They spotted the ring of fire heading towards them. Argrave held his breath. The Veidimen raised a hand, obviously preparing to cast a spell. At that moment, the rings of fire all reached their target. As soon as they touched the gas, the flames leapt forward like a lunging snake, immediately enveloping and entering the shacks.

A dread howl echoed through the grove, the mix of what sounded like a thousand animals coming awake at once. The birds screeched, the wolves howled, the bears roared, and the snow elves screamed—in surprise or pain, Argrave did not know.

Their assault had begun.