

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 18: Raging Tempest, Roaring Flames

In planning this assault, Argrave confronted a fact about himself. He was not eager to fight; he had no desire for war or battle. Anxiety led him to where he was—anxiety that, if he did nothing, his life would slip from his fingers, spiraling towards misery and death. Argrave knew the fate of the world, the coming wars, plagues, natural disasters, and Gerechtigheit. He was the only who did. This knowledge, in his eyes, laid a burden upon him to act. Perhaps it was the only reason he was here in this realm to begin with. It was the reason he was here, today.

Time seemed to move slower once the druid's shack had been consumed in flame, yet Argrave still felt that things were moving too quickly. The druids screamed and thrashed about, consumed by chaos. They had been sleeping, and after waking up to flames, they did not act rationally. Some thought fast enough to cast water magic, but the effort was uncoordinated. Furthermore, the gas that Argrave had used was particularly insidious; it was harvested from a reptile attuned to fire called a Whitetongue, and the flames it produced burned incredibly hot. The temperature would fade, but for now, it was far deadlier than the average fire.

Both Galamon and Argrave stayed and watched Tirros' building. The initial strike was pivotal, and because of the chaos it caused, it allowed them to retain the element of surprise longer. The druids could not coordinate properly. A few seconds stretched as the fires burned—and then, a pair of people ran out from Tirros' shack.

Argrave heard a *twang*, and Galamon released the Ebonice arrow. Perhaps it was the potion enhancing his senses, but he swore he could follow it with his eyes as it whistled through the air. Tirros, an experienced general and spellcaster, had already prepared a magic barrier to block potential threats, shielding both himself and his company.

This was not unexpected. Argrave prepared Ebonice for a reason.

Ebonice was not a metal, despite being black and metallic looking. It was ice—magical ice hailing from Veiden that greatly interfered with magic. On contact with magic, it would dispel it. If it pierced a spellcaster's body, though... their ability to cast spells would be severely diminished. The arrow they'd made was barbed—if it struck, it would not be easy to remove without sundering yet more flesh.

The arrow met Tirros' barrier and the magic shattered soundlessly, fragmenting like glass. Continuing onward, it struck Tirros' forearm, piercing deep into flesh. The snow

elf druid staggered back, grabbing the other with him for support. The other druid cast a weaker barrier spell and moved forward, shielding Tirros with their body.

“He is hit,” Galamon said matter-of-factly, though Argrave barely heard it underneath the din of chaos.

The area around them seemed to quiet down as the Ebonice took effect—the roaring animals quieted, their cries lighter and more confused. Tirros was using a druid’s spell, [Progenitor], to give a portion of his abilities to the druids working with him in his scouting unit. Now that he was affected, they were all affected. The chaos, ignited by the flames, was expounded by the severance from their leader.

“Go for Tirros,” Argrave directed quickly. “I will follow shortly behind. Dispatching him quickly is pivotal for our success.”

Galamon stood from cover, stepping away from the trees and into the clearing. Argrave watched him go, chest swirling with slowly dulling fear as the potion took effect. He clenched his fists, grit his teeth, and pursued shortly behind Galamon. As he grew closer to the flames which still raged furiously, he felt the intense heat and the nauseating smell of burnt hair. There was another smell. It was putrid, but Argrave could not question more beyond that. He had no time.

Argrave felt bare and exposed without a barrier—he did not know any ward magic—but he continued onwards, Tirros and the Veidimen beside him consuming his focus. He reached into his satchel bag and pulled free the last bottle, popping its cork off. It was cold, like touching ice. Tirros tried to use his magic with his uninjured hand, but Argrave could see the spell-matrix breaking before his eyes. Tirros quickly deduced what was happening and instructed the one with him to provide aid.

Galamon ran quickly across the clearing, coming ever closer towards Tirros. The Veidimen beside Tirros yanked on the arrow fiercely, but the wounded druid only cried out in pain. Tirros pushed the other away, directing him towards the approaching Galamon. The druid conjured elemental magic from behind the barrier—a spear of wind hurtled out towards the snow elf, but he swatted it aside with the Ebonice axe, and its magic dissipated into the air. It did succeed in slowing the mercenary, however.

Argrave raised a hand and used blood magic for the first time, conjuring the spell [Pierce], which shot a fast-moving projectile in a straight line. It was necessary to use blood magic to break the barrier; no elemental spells Argrave knew would suffice. At once, a red bolt no wider than a pencil tore through the air. After using blood magic, Argrave felt as though someone had torn a tendon from his wrist and cried out in pain.

The barrier was pierced, though, and the druid beside Tirros fell onto his back, struck squarely in the stomach. Galamon proceeded unabated. Tirros did not remain idle,

however. With his free hand, he grabbed the arrow. He pinned his arm underneath his leg and pulled. The arrow was freed, but the man's arm nearly split in half. Tirros shouted in agony, but he still tossed aside the arrow, raised his hand, and cast magic.

As soon as Argrave saw Tirros free the arrow, he brought the bottle he held to his mouth and drank. It burned as though he had dropped a cube of dry ice in his mouth. In a matter of seconds, that cold feeling spread throughout his entire body. Then, he triggered the Blessing of Supersession. At once, he felt a great sea of magic billowing within him, threatening to erupt free from his mouth, his nose. Despite this, the potion he drank earlier kept him calm.

Though Argrave wished to dispatch Tirros quickly, he had always been considering the notion that the high-ranking spellcaster would be able to cast spells. Tirros, even amidst pain, was a veteran of battles and an experienced spellcaster. His first priority once he was free of the Ebonice would be to regain control of the situation. To do that, he would need to stop the attackers and help his men.

In such a situation, Tirros would most likely call on elemental magic: a water spell with a large area of effect. Argrave could think of many the druid might cast, but his conclusion was that the best way to counter them all was with potent ice magic. Argrave had drunk the blood of a Winter Nymph; a very deadly ingredient, ordinarily, but it enhanced one's ice magic, and its side effects were partially abated by the presence of heat.

Two twin geysers of water erupted from Tirros' hand towards Galamon, swirling together and forming a cone that tore the earth as it proceeded. Water showered everywhere indiscriminately. Argrave recognized the spell; the B-rank magic, [Rip Current]. Galamon paused, and Argrave advanced in front of him. He held both hands out, and D-rank matrixes formed in front of his hands. He felt the chill of the Winter Nymph's blood rushing to his fingers, turning them gray and numb. Argrave cast [Frost Wave], and a burst of sheer cold of ridiculous magnitude erupted forth.

He continued to use [Frost Wave], and the dangerously-fast [Rip Current] slowed before pausing in air. Argrave used another spell, [Wind Hammer], and shattered the ice. Galamon rushed forth, pushing past the falling ice crystals.

Tirros stood shakily and walked backwards, preparing another spell. Galamon raised the axe to dispatch him, but the druid beside Tirros that Argrave had attacked earlier had not died from the stomach wound—he interfered briefly with the snow elf mercenary, grabbing his legs as he tried to move. It was enough time for Tirros to gain distance and prepare another spell.

Argrave aimed towards the druid grappling with Galamon and cast an E-rank lightning spell, [Bolt]. It tore through the air and struck him, and Galamon broke free from his grip. Argrave used [Bolt] time and time again in quick succession until the druid had fallen.

The chill of the Winter Nymph's blood was growing harsher, and Argrave sidled towards the flames, their heat a welcome reprieve.

Galamon came just before Tirros, but the man had prepared another spell. A small tornado erupted forth. Galamon slashed its center with his Ebonice axe and it dissipated, exploding in all directions as the magic lost its will. The sheer power of the wind sent Argrave stumbling, and the flames roared and twisted, redoubling in heat. Tirros was knocked on his back. Though Galamon barely stumbled from the wind explosion, his Ebonice axe flew free from his grip. The Veidimen mercenary drew his greatsword and proceeded, stabbing it towards Tirros.

Tirros conjured a barrier, and the greatsword bent slightly when it impacted. Argrave's mind worked as fast as it ever had. He rushed past the fragments of ice littered on the ground, grabbing the Ebonice arrow and throwing it clumsily. He used wind magic to send it faster, but it had minimal effect on account of the Ebonice. The arrow flew, spinning in the air, and struck the barrier sideways. It was enough, though—Tirros' ward fell, and Galamon seized the opportunity. He stepped forward and stabbed Tirros' eye. His struggles ceased instantly.

Now that the largest threat was dealt with, Argrave did not lose himself in celebration. He whipped his head back around towards the roaring flames, proceeding onwards with breath surging white out of his mouth. He used one of the best D-rank elemental attack spells, [Writhing Lightning]. Even if it missed its target, the lightning would surge along whatever surface it had struck towards living opponents. Accuracy was not his concern with magic flowing into him from Erlebnis.

Lightning danced through the air, the power of the Blessing of Supersession enabling and encouraging him to attack with reckless abandon. The further he proceeded into the flames, the more his pain from drinking the Winter Nymph's blood lessened. Whatever living moved within the flames, he attacked. Their screams of anguish were hidden by the crack of the thunder echoing out into the forest.

When he felt his body was no longer under duress from the Winter Nymph's blood, he retreated from the flames, watching for movement. Galamon came to stand beside Argrave, and so he cast water magic to begin diminishing the inferno. Galamon had an arrow nocked, watching everything in front of them. Slowly, the fires began to die down, and the scenery was revealed in earnest.

The clearing, which had been grassy and green, had been charred black. The shacks were burnt to ashes. The druids' bodies were everywhere, charred beyond recognition. Some were twisted, still spasming and sparking with lightning. Time stretched as Argrave maintained a wary intensity. Seeing no movement, he slowly calmed. As the adrenaline began to fade, Argrave's dulled senses became clearer.

Argrave recognized that putrid smell he sensed earlier. It brought back a memory. Whenever his father would make hamburgers, his brother would always demand that his hamburgers be burnt. That same smell hung in the air.

With that realization, the crushing reality of what he had done set in, and Argrave fell to the ground, vomiting profusely. His vomit was mercury-colored because of the Winter Nymph's blood. His eyes and nose were dripping, and the pain began to set in. He had been cut from the ice shards and burned half a dozen times, but the wounds were light and he barely even noticed it until now.

Galamon stood above him, alert as ever, seemingly unaffected by it all. Argrave's vomiting fit continued until he was dry heaving. Once the Blessing of Supersession wore off, he felt entirely back in reality. He stayed on the ground, trying to bring his mind to heel. Galamon scanned the forest line, watching in caution.

Having deemed there were no more threats, Galamon released the bow string slowly, keeping the arrow nocked. He walked off, but Argrave was not sure where. It was only once he returned with his Ebonice axe in hand that Argrave deduced things. He felt a big hand wrap around his arm, and he was hoisted to his feet.

"Drink," prompted Galamon, holding a canteen to his face. It was filthy, but Argrave could not be bothered by his germaphobia with all that was occurring around him. He drank, but the water made him choke.

"Drink slowly," Galamon added. Argrave obeyed, taking small sips. "The battle is won. All of the druids are dead. You can take time."

Some time passed. Argrave stayed standing, staring at the scene that he had been the cause of. Argrave was slowly beginning to get his bearings again.

"You did well. Two men killed an entire scouting party from Veiden. Your strategy and bearing were both excellent."

Argrave processed the words. Though they may have been intended to console, they did not make him feel good.