

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 26: The Holy Fool

Argrave opened the door to the abandoned house. He was greeted by a harsh smell. Galamon stood at the table, a fire heating up a large glass bottle that had been turned black by the flames.

“Jesus,” Argrave said, coughing. “I forgot how bad that stuff smells. You get used to it when you live next to it, but...”

“You’re back,” Galamon said. “Sleep well?”

“Better than usual.” Galamon nodded at Argrave’s answer, then picked up the glass bottle. He smothered the flames with a blanket.

“This was the last potion. Eight bottles of the calming brew, four stamina-restoring potions. I fixed the Ebonice arrow. It was bent.”

“I presume your leeching session went well?” He strode in, waving in front of his face to dispel the smell.

Galamon looked at Argrave coldly.

“Come on,” Argrave urged, tapping Galamon’s elbow. “Laughing at something is how you learn to live with it.”

The snow elf set the potion down and picked up a cloth to wipe his hands. “It is a curse. An affliction. An illness is no laughing matter.”

Argrave pursed his lips. “You don’t have to sleep, you don’t age, and the only price is a strange diet and heliophobia.”

“I will not rest with Veid when I die. Instead, I will be lost in the abyss.”

“So, don’t die,” Argrave said, then laughed. His laughter trailed to a stop as Galamon’s pure white eyes stared at him like he was a bug. “Well, whatever. If it’s so terrible, once we’ve killed the world-ending ancient calamity, we can cure you. Until then, keep those fangs sharp.”

“Vampirism cannot be cured,” Galamon said quickly.

“Not by you alone. Me? I have my ways.”

Galamon shook his head. “Erlebnis’ method would be costly.”

“Pfft, where’d that come from?” Argrave waved his hand dismissively, then looked around for his satchel. “Why involve an ancient god? There are plenty of ways.”

Galamon stared. “Supposing that is true... you assume I will not die in your fool’s quest.”

Argrave looked at him, pausing. “You won’t.”

“Looking at you now... that possibility had never entered your head before I mentioned it.”

“No one’s dying. Stop being a doomer,” Argrave held his hand up. “I’ll die centuries before you do. Stop with the morbidity. We’ve got to pack. You’ve got to pack. We’re heading to Barden.” Argrave grabbed the satchel and threw it over his shoulders. “Amendment; I am going to Barden. You are going beyond Barden, to a dingy little ruin called... I can’t pronounce it. Aethel-something.”

Galamon paused, but eventually moved and grabbed his bag, putting stoppers in the bottles and loading them in. “It’s the eve of war, and you’re sending me away? Imprudent.”

“As much as I’d like you to hold my hand through these stormy tides, these past few days of reviewing my plans mentally have led me to one conclusion; getting an audience with Patriarch Dras is going to be extremely difficult. I need a little something to turn his head. In the chaos of battle, no one is going to listen to me if I shout that an ancient calamity is waking up and I need to see their leader.”

“Get to the point,” Galamon said, waving his hands as though to hurry things up.

Argrave paused and stared at him. “No, I won’t get to the point. I refuse. Anyway, I was thinking of some ancient traditions the Veidimen have that I might be able to take advantage of. I remember that in case of a snowstorm, the Veidimen would signal each other, even if they were enemies, for shelter.”

Galamon raised a brow in surprise but nodded. “The Veelstron sign, yes. I am surprised you know of it. But it’s only accepted if there are extremely pressing circumstances that require cooperation or prevent conflict. Life comes before conflict.”

“Right,” Argrave nodded. He grabbed a few of the bottles off the table and put them in his satchel. “I’m glad you confirmed, because frankly, I wasn’t quite sure I got it right. I

also don't know how to make the signal. Simply put, you need to head to the ruins to create the circumstances for the... Veelstron sign," Argrave pronounced each syllable, ensuring he said it properly.

Galamon frowned. "What exactly is in these ruins?"

"It's a tomb," Argrave said excitedly. He'd finished packing all of the potions and came to stand before Galamon. "It holds some ancient race of elves that—well, I could talk about that place for hours, but I'll skip the details. When their warriors grew old, they'd cover their bodies in melted metal and trap their souls inside. They'd bury their possessions beside them. Therefore, they'd carry their wealth for all eternity."

Galamon brushed his hair back. "I am not sure that I like—"

"You'll have to go in there. There's a seal on the door, but it broke recently—some stupid miners, you'll find them dead just about everywhere. From the entryway, you'll need to head to the end room."

"You want me to fight against a tomb of guardians? You overestimate my capabilities."

"They won't fight unless you take something," Argrave assured. "Just be sure not to kick anything around, you'll be fine—I swear."

"Why not send your illusionist friend? The yellow-haired, short woman. Surely she, with proven stealth capabilities, would be better at—"

"These things don't have the normal five senses. They sense one's magic. Besides, it's dark in there. You have vampire eyes."

Galamon went mute, gaze growing distant.

"There's a crown at the end of the tomb. It's on top of their dead king's head. You'll have to take it and run. All of them will wake up, but they're pretty slow-moving. As long as you're quick, it should be fine. They hit pretty hard, though. Don't get hit," Argrave emphasized, pointing. "Might as well leave your weapons out front, barring that axe you've got. Hard to kill them without magic, anyhow."

Galamon moved to the chair and sat down. He turned his head up at Argrave.

"Ever since you mentioned you were fighting Gerechtigheit, I had considered returning the 3000 gold that you paid me. You were fighting against the world-ending calamity. It is my duty to help, I thought." He pointed to Argrave. "That's changed. I'm sending it to my family in Veiden, like normal. It's the last bit of gold they might receive."

Argrave smiled. "Listen, I know your capabilities. These guys are slow and clumsy. Being heavy is their only virtue. Once the fighting breaks out, you'll be off to fetch them in short order. It's my duty to hold out until then. We'll parley with the Veidimen, kill the tomb guardians, and then I'll use this silver tongue of mine to get a meeting with Dras."

Galamon shook his head and sighed. Argrave had rarely seen such an expression on the big man's face. He stood, and Argrave looked up to meet his eyes.

"Your plan makes me question your sanity. You possess the same sort of boldness Dras did, I think. He united all of Veiden; you challenge He Who Would Judge the Gods. Both are monumental tasks beyond my ambition. I was proud to serve under Dras; let us see if things are as you suggest, and I will live long enough to take pride in working under you."

"Like I said, you'll be fine," Argrave hesitantly reached out and touched his shoulder. "I'm more worried about myself. I have to hold out against a tide of Veidimen while you get the cavalry."

The atmosphere became harmonious for a moment. Argrave remembered something.

"The only dangerous guardians are the archers. Those... well, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Depression washed back over Galamon's face once again.

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A humble carriage drove down a poorly made road. It was wooden, and though it looked well-crafted, it was unadorned with fanciful things. Its most notable feature was a set of statues atop it. It depicted various human figures in saint-like poses. Each seemed to represent something. The modest carriage was contrasted fiercely by an array of gold-armored knights on horseback. They were royal knights, and they guarded the carriage diligently.

As the carriage continued along the road, the carriage driver brought the horses to a slow, seeing something ahead in the road. It looked like a heap of black cloth, but it was large enough that the carriage would not be able to drive over it unimpeded. The royal knights moved ahead, well used to dealing with such a thing by this point.

One of the knights dismounted and reached over to the heap of cloth to pick it up and throw it aside, but he paused. His back straightened, and then he kicked the cloth. It rolled over, revealing that that pile was actually a body.

The carriage door opened. A very large man dismounted. He wore a set of white robes, and they concealed a set of black plate armor. His black hair was bound into one large braid, dropping behind him to his knees. His eyes were gray and his brows were thick and bushy, giving his gaze a fierce quality.

“Prince Orion,” one of the royal knights greeted, bowing from atop a horse. “There is a block ahead in the road. This will be only a moment.”

Orion said nothing, walking out into the road in long, somewhat dainty strides. His clean white robe dragged along the ground, but he did not seem to care. Ahead, the knight had kneeled over the body on the road, examining it. When he heard footsteps, he turned his head. Seeing Orion, he moved to block him quickly.

“My Prince. I believe this man is diseased. You should keep your distance.” The knight tried to stop Orion with a hand.

“The gods protect me from harm, loyal knight.” Orion pushed past the knight, coming to stand before the body. He kneeled down and removed his gauntlet.

The body’s gender was indistinguishable beneath the cloth, even with the face exposed. The flesh was waxy and badly malformed—it was very similar to severe leprosy in some respects. Orion held his hands over the face.

“I feel heat.” He lowered his hand, nearly touching the skin.

“Be careful, my Prince. I have never seen anything like this disease.”

Orion paused, then stood. He grabbed the knight’s helmet, lifted it up, and grabbed the man’s neck.

“I told you the gods protect me. Do you doubt their vows?! Do you think they will allow harm to come to their favorite child?”

The knight only sputtered. Orion released him, and then stepped forward, hugging the knight as the man coughed and tried to breathe properly.

“Forgive me. The wrath of Gael consumed me. You are a loyal knight, and kind besides. I love you. We are all the gods’ children on this realm.” He squeezed tightly, and a single tear fell from his eye.

Orion released his embrace and turned away, leaving the knight gasping for air. One of the other knights watched this scene but stayed deathly still. One could veritably see the uneasiness beneath his armor. Eventually, the knight stepped forward and said, “There’s a village ahead that the road passes through. What do you... wish to do, my Prince?”

“I love them all,” Orion said, as though in answer. “All of them. They’re my people. The gods gave me a crook with which to herd men; the gift of their voice, the power of their presence.”

The knight elected to stay silent, waiting for Orion to continue.

“They’ve spoken to me these past few days. Warning me of an enemy—a worm crawling in the skin, around corners trajectory of deadly touch tarantula spiders. I kept my eyes open. Now I see it; the gods did not tell me of a *man* seeking to do me harm. They spoke of this fell disease.”

“...Prince?” the knight prompted.

“I must help them.” Orion walked forward along the road. “This war my brother wrote to me of—it does not matter. The people are the gods’ creation, and I must keep them safe.”

“But, my Prince...” the knight followed. “How? We have no healers, no food, no water, no medicine...”

“I will find a way. No matter if I need to sell my clothes, my body, they must be helped. This is my enemy; one of my many great tribulations before I, too, ascend to godhood and meet my friends that whisper in my ear the truths wrested from the clenched hand of the heavens.”

Orion walked, step after step, down the road. He’d left his gauntlet beside the body of the man who had fallen. The royal knights could only cast uneasy glances at each other before following onwards.

Chapter 27: Dread Breath of War

Argrave spurred his horse forward, holding his hand to the satchel on his side to keep the bottles from banging about. He knew the terrain well after years of wandering about in ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ and Argrave stuck near the coast as he headed for Barden. Galamon rode beside him. It had been a challenge to find a horse that could support the elf’s weight and height, but they had managed. The horses belonged to the Dukedom, technically, but Nikoletta had secured them for the two of them.

“Don’t fight the horse,” Galamon instructed, yelling loudly so his voice carried as they moved. The snow elf was a much better rider than he. “Don’t react to its movements after they’ve happened. Move in sync with it. It’ll reduce the burden on both your and its body.”

“Yeah, I’ll just do that. Move in sync with the horse. It’s easy, bro. Just do it,” Argrave muttered into the wind with a mock jock-tone.

The horse carried onwards. Argrave watched for landmarks, guiding them to their destination. The suns were high overhead, and the temperature was pleasant. This place didn't seem like one on the eve of war.

The two of them rode onwards for a long while. Eventually, Argrave could see the distant buildings of a village; it was not Barden, though. This place was made of cheap wood and straw. Barden was much beyond it. Argrave adjusted his shoulders, telling himself that the journey was probably half done.

The sound of a horn filled the air. Argrave thought it was uncannily similar to that of a steamboat. He had wits enough to slow his horse instead of pulling it to a stop instantly, and he looked at where the noise had come from.

The horn came again. Argrave could see someone standing atop an outpost at the village with a horn larger than themselves held above their head.

"There, beyond the crags," Galamon said, pulling up beside Argrave. "A longship cuts the waters."

Argrave looked out across the sea, squinting his eyes. He saw a moving mass of brown. They flew a red flag with a black wheel in the center. It was too distant to make out details beyond that.

Argrave cursed. "So much for that conversation with the god-forsaken Duke. A waste of time. I could have learned a useful C-rank spell. Instead, I spent it giving advice for an invasion that was happening today."

"Don't think on it. You will get lost with that mentality," Galamon cautioned.

"Rely not on the likelihood of the enemy's not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him." Argrave turned to Galamon. "They're still at sea. Let's move. Once we get to Barden, you'll have to keep going."

"Right."

They both spurred their horses forward, moving faster than they had before. The horn continued to blow, and the village ahead became a hive of movement. People ran inside their homes, barricading windows and doors. The village militia, bolstered by a few dozen knights, spread out along the front of the village in the coast, urging fishermen to get away.

The pair had planned to travel through the village, but Argrave redirected them along the outskirts so as not to interfere with people moving about the road. As they rode by, shouts of unease and urgency entered their ears.

My leisure caused this. I should have acted faster. I should have acted smarter. I knew it was coming, and I didn't do it right.

Argrave did not have the time to get lost in self-reflection, as the road demanded his attention. It was difficult to suppress the urge to look out at the ocean and see how close the longships had come to the shore.

As they travelled along the road, Argrave's whirling mind made the time pass by quicker. Before long, Barden came into sight. It was a quaint village with a larger dock than the one before it. The houses looked firmer than the village before, and it possessed a meager palisade to ward off attackers. The longships had not yet reached it.

"There's Barden," Argrave shouted, turning his head to look at Galamon. "Do you remember the directions I told you?"

"You're asking now? Of course I do," Galamon answered back.

"Good, good." Argrave muttered, nervousness brewing within. "Once we reach the palisade..."

"I know," Galamon nodded. "We discussed this already. There is nothing left but to do our duties."

Argrave took a deep breath, looking forward silently after hearing Galamon's words. He saw in his peripheries some longships moving towards Barden, and hurried his horse even faster than it was already going.

The gates had closed at Barden. Galamon broke off from Argrave, and the nervous storm roiling in his chest became a tsunami crashing around. He was all alone. The defense of Barden—and perhaps his life—would rely only on his ability alone. He hadn't repaid his magic debt to Erlebnis. He could not use the Blessing of Supersession.

Argrave slowed his horse, stopping at the gate. He shouted, "I come from Mateth! I need to speak to Knight Ryles!"

He heard some people speaking within loudly, and eventually, the gate opened. A knight stood there. "Knight Ryles is here, sir. He's with the knights near the docks, helping the people get to safety within their homes." He pointed down to the docks.

"Thank you," Argrave said, slightly winded. He led the horse, and then promptly dismounted. He left it there without tying it to anything. A horse would be of no use to him now, anyway. Leaving was not an option, not anymore.

Argrave walked down to the docks. He spotted the knight he was looking for—the leader of this detachment of knights, Knight Ryles. He had a blue plume on his helmet.

He was one of the few to survive the invasion on Monticci. In the game, Ryles led a guerilla force against the Veidimen after they seized the coast.

The knights were speaking amongst themselves, while the militia waited a fair distance away, waiting to be told what to do by the knights.

“Knight Ryles,” Argrave shouted out, drawing the man’s attention. He walked closer until he stood face-to-face. “Knight Ryles. I’m glad I made it in time.”

“You know me?” the knight asked, his voice echoing from beneath his helmet as he looked up at Argrave.

“No, not before this. Duke Enrico sent me here. I am Argrave of Blackgard,” After bringing up his old pseudonym, Argrave reached in his pocket and retrieved the Mark of Monticci he had been given this morning. “Barden is likely to become an important battleground. He wished for me to...” Argrave swallowed the words, ‘take command.’ No matter what mark he had, things would not go well if he seized command from a respected commander on the eve of battle.

“He wished for me to offer guidance on how to deal with the snow elves, and further offer my abilities as a Wizard of the Gray Owl.”

“A spellcaster? Your kind are always welcome. But guidance? I am not sure...” Ryles trailed off.

Argrave interrupted. “I was the one to deal with the druids hiding in the forest. I know how these elves fight. I won’t undermine your command, but Barden is an important strategic position, and I can help you devise countermeasures to their strategies.”

Ryles lowered his head. Argrave could not see his expression from behind the helmet, but he knew the man was deep in thought.

A knight standing nearby interjected, “There isn’t time for much, Knight Ryles. Their strange ships are approaching.”

Ryles looked behind him at the ocean, and then back at Argrave. “Tell me your thoughts. I’ll decide whether or not to implement them.”

Argrave surveyed the surroundings quickly. “They can only land on the left side—the cliffs to the right of Barden are too steep, and the docks too narrow for a warship to fit. We should send the skiffs out to sea without anyone on them. Any sort of impediment preventing the elves beaching smoothly will be helpful.”

“But the—”

“Property isn’t important now,” Argrave interrupted, walking out into the docks. “Look at the number of elves on those longships. They are likely the same number as we, but each is heavily armored and highly skilled.”

Ryles put his hand on the pommel of his sheathed sword, but eventually nodded. “You’re right. It’s a good idea. Tell the militia to do that,” Ryles directed one of the knights. “What else?”

“The archers should take their place behind the palisades. The Veidimen have throwing axes, javelins—our bowmen need cover. If there is no position they can look over the palisade, stack crates or furniture for them to shoot effectively.”

Ryles nodded. “What of the spearmen?”

“They should receive the elves on the shore.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re sending those men to their deaths,” Ryles protested.

“It isn’t ridiculous. These men have never seen large scale battle before. The palisades will break in seconds, and the Veidimen will lose the disadvantage of being at sea. If you send in your elite knights and they are routed completely, these militiamen will break and run. Besides, the spears will be effective at slowing their movement in the shallow water. If I am just behind them, I can attack with magic while the elves are slowed.”

Ryles shifted on his feet, devising a rebuttal. “You assume my knights will be routed easily.”

“If you think I am tall, I am barely above average amongst the snow elves.” Argrave shook his head. “They are giants, one and all. Furthermore, they are no stranger to warfare. Their fighting style is fierce and rapid; though it’s uncomfortable to think about, seeing them battle the militia may prepare your knights better for their attack.”

Ryles grew quiet for a moment, considering Argrave’s opinion. He lifted his head towards Argrave. “You said you would stand on the battlefield? Not behind the palisade?”

“If the militia are first on the beach, yes. The knights should be behind them. I will stand with the knights.”

Argrave turned his gaze to the ocean. The militia were busy pushing out the boats to sea, and before long, the ocean was filled with empty vessels drifting along with the tides. The longships loomed ever closer. Argrave could see someone standing on the

front of one of the boats. It was a woman; she had very long white hair and wore a white fur outfit.

“What is she doing here?” Argrave said aloud despite himself.

“What?” Ryles questioned.

“Nothing,” Argrave dismissed. “Someone I know on the docks, that’s all.”

Internally, Argrave cursed. *That’s Anneliese. Why is she here? She specifically never entered the vanguard...*

Anneliese was one of the most prominent Veidimen characters. After Mateth fell, she became Dras’ chief strategist after distinguishing herself in the siege. She had two very powerful traits; [Genius] and [Empath]. She used them both to great effect to devise very good battle plans that read the opponent like a book. That was the lore, at least; in game, she was an extremely powerful mage. Her magic affinity, just like Argrave’s, was high. At this early juncture in the game, she was likely a C-rank spellcaster.

Ryles nodded, seemingly having made up his mind. “If you’re confident enough in your idea as to stand out in the frontlines, I’m inclined to put more belief in that.”

“Then we have talked enough. Let’s move,” Argrave answered quickly.

“Right. You all heard our conversation, men and women! Convey the orders to the militia. We have very little time!” Ryles shouted, rushing to the gate. He drew his sword, and the militia manning the gate worked together to pull the gate open with a string. Argrave followed him out on foot.

Argrave opened up his satchel bag and retrieved two potions. He drank them both and tossed them to the ground. Rotating his shoulders, he felt the nervousness fade from his body and the aches he’d accumulated from horse-riding became a distant memory. After, he pushed the satchel to his back and followed the militia who were just beginning to head onto the beach.

Damn it all. Anneliese, Argrave cursed internally. I don’t know if she’s a soldier, if she’s leading, or if she’s merely a mage helping. I don’t want to kill her before brokering peace with the Veidimen. She was always invaluable when fighting Gerechtigkei.

“Whatever happens, happens,” Argrave said, mostly to himself. He strode out onto the beach. The longships just began to collide with the drifting boats, slowing slightly but pushing onwards. The time had come.

Chapter 28: Confronting the Long Sleep

The oars on the longships churned the sea, pushing towards the shore. There were three of them. The skiffs, adrift on the tides, were pushed aside, some filling with water and sinking. Other got caught in the oars, and some were beached, but the effect was achieved—the leading longship slowed greatly, faltering just before the shore. The militiamen by the palisades launched a volley of arrows, and the snow elves aboard had to block them with their shields and duck low. Only a few were hit.

Argrave had planned to use a fire spell to catch the ship aflame, but Anneliese would quickly counter that with magic of her own. He could not see her now; she had likely moved to the back. He stood a little in front of the knights, watching the situation with a calm mind. The militiamen stood before them holding their spears out to the boat ahead like pikemen waiting for a horse's charge.

He saw someone fly through the air, leaping like a grasshopper from the back of the boat. He saw a waving mass of white hair and recognized the person as Anneliese; she had used a C-rank wind spell to launch herself to the boat further from the shore. He watched her closely. She pointed to the archers behind the palisade and shouted at the oarsmen.

She's recognized the archers as the largest threat, Argrave thought to himself. As the closest longship slowly started to push past the tide of fishing boats, the archers had prepared another round of arrows to fire. They were close enough that not many missed, but the Veidimen blocked them with their large shields very well. After, the elves stood and threw javelins and axes. Their accuracy was terrifying, and the few archers that did not duck received a grievous blow.

Ahead, the longship Anneliese had landed on veered off from the beach and headed straight towards the docks. *She's planning to ram it into the docks so that she can get at the archers quickly. She'd lose the boat, almost certainly, but the archers are defenseless.* Argrave considered stepping away to protect them, but the bulk of the troops would still be at the beach, and so he stayed.

Ryles, though, was not idle. "Militiamen, three steps forward! Knight Gilbert, take the men beneath you and protect the docks!"

One knight broke off from the rest, and five men followed behind him. The gates opened for them and quickly shut. At the beaches, the first of the Veidimen jumped from the longship and into the shallow waters. Each bore a long axe and a round shield. The militiamen rushed forward, stabbing at a long range with their spears.

Argrave stepped forward. If Anneliese was absent, he could go back to the original plan. He held his hand out and conjured his only C-rank spell, [Wargfire]. He felt the magic

within drain significantly, and a great wolf of fire lunged forward, catching one of the Veidimen aflame and setting the bow of the longship on fire. He had used a large spell so that the fire would not be extinguished easily, though he loathed spending so much of his magic so early.

The snow elf that had been caught on fire dropped into the water to extinguish the flames, and the militiamen seized the initiative to stab him as he lay there. Like this, their confidence was bolstered. Another of the Veidimen waded from the shallows onto the shore, receiving three spears on his shield. He swatted them aside and threw his axe right at Argrave.

Argrave did not retreat; he stepped forward and cast an E-rank wind spell. It was a common strategy to use wind magic against projectiles in 'Heroes of Berendar,' as wards were costly and restrictive. The axe bounced back, falling into the sand. The leading elf was stopped by the mound of militiamen, blocking with his shield as he pulled a spare axe strapped to his waist.

The flames did not spread too quickly, but they consumed the front of the ship, making it impossible to drop right into the shallow water immediately. Most of the Veidimen were jumping into the deep portion of the water now, swimming towards the shore. Some beached skiffs funneled them into a line, restricting their mobility.

Argrave waited until they were bunched closely for maximum efficiency and started casting [Writhing Lightning] sparingly. The electricity danced between the group, offering the militiamen time to attack in the spasms that followed. Some of them were unable to raise their shields in time to block spears, and they began to fall one after the other.

Despite the clear disadvantage, the Veidimen began to push the militiamen back, blocking their spears and pushing forward. Another volley of arrows came from behind, and the Veidimen could not block. Many of them fell dead or wounded into the sea, arrows sticking from their backs.

Behind the first longship, the second was coming in at a fair distance to the left, giving the first a wide berth and attempting to land far away from where the troops were most concentrated. The third longship sped towards the docks with terrifying speed, well prepared to sacrifice the vessel for an advantage.

In front of Argrave, one of the snow elves hooked a spear with an axe, yanking one of the militiamen forward. The elf dispatched the man with chilling efficiency after with a blow to the head. He stepped over the corpse of one of his comrades, advancing forward into a tide of spears. The few Veidimen still aboard the longship tossed axes, killing many of the spearmen who were not expecting such an attack.

The spearmen, shaken after such a turn, nearly broke formation. Ryles shouted behind, "Hold the line!"

A monstrous noise roared from the docks, and Argrave saw the longship cut into the village of Barden. The Veidimen aboard rocked, holding the railings tightly, and some few fell into the sea. Screams came from the village—some panicked, others crying out in war. The archers turned to address the snow elves that were landing behind them.

"Wizard Argrave!" Ryles shouted over the din. "I will leave you here with two knights. Take command of the spearmen! We must go confront the second landing party!"

No, you idiot! We finish this group up quickly, and then move to confront the others!

"Understood!" Argrave returned despite his thoughts. He reflected another javelin with an E-rank wind-spell. He was starting to feel his calm mind waver, and he quickly retrieved another potion from his satchel to suppress his rising nerves. He finished it and dropped it to the sand.

The knights marched away, their loud clangs of steel heading towards the longship in the distance. As though seeing a chance, the Veidimen before them pushed forward, bracing their shields and pushing. Some of the militia's spears bent and snapped.

This push against the tide continued, the snow elves forcing back the superior numbers of the militiamen up the beach. Soon, they were near dry sand. One of the militiamen fell, grabbing a fellow by his side for support. The line collapsed in the center, and the Veidimen seized the initiative.

Argrave lunged and cast the D-rank [Wind Wall] hoping to stall the snow elves from advancing further long enough for the line to recover. Though they bounced back, one stepped forward with a glimmering black axe of Ebonice, shattering the wind barrier before it could do much of anything. The snow elf was perhaps five feet away, and steadily approached Argrave.

Pivoting on his foot, Argrave casted [Writhing Lightning] at the ground to avoid the Ebonice. The damage was diminished but the man spasmed, and Argrave stepped forward, pulling the axe from his loose grip. He held his other hand to the man's visor, conjuring the E-rank spell [Wind Knife], piercing his eyes through the Viking-like spangenhelm. He pushed the man's dead body backward into the tide of Veidimen.

"Knights! Advance with me! Militiamen, retreat three steps and reform the line!"

Two armored knights came beside Argrave, protecting him with their shields. Argrave's magic was half-spent by his estimation. The tide of Veidimen rushing forth slowed and

split as the dead body fell in front of them. The Ebonice axe felt heavy, but Argrave held it at hand.

“Shield charge!” Argrave directed the two knights. They rushed forward, slamming into the tide of Veidimen with their shields. Despite the size difference, without much countering momentum the front few elves fell backwards like dominos, and their advance was stalled briefly. Seeing them so thoroughly bunched, Argrave cast another [Writhing Lightning] in the center. The knights stepped forward, stabbing at those who had fallen.

“Knights, fall behind the spear line!” Argrave commanded, stepping backwards. The Veidimen, after gaining their bearings, rushed forward with great speed. Argrave cast another [Wind Wall], and they collided against it before moving around it. Argrave and the knights slipped past the militia line, waiting behind them.

The snow elves rushed towards them, unimpeded by water or slopes any longer. Their armor and clothes were drenched and they ran through sand, so their speed was not at full potential. Still, their formidable size and unified charge made it seem like confronting a charging elephant. The militiamen stepped back even though the enemy was many yards away.

“How convenient!” Argrave shouted and laughed. “They’re coming to be impaled on their own!”

His humor was not exceptional, but it had the effect he intended; the militiamen were calmed slightly. Some of the snow elves hung back, throwing axes and javelins through the air. Argrave countered what few came near him with low-ranking wind-magic. When their charge was close, Argrave held his hand out and shot another [Writhing Lightning] at the ground before them. Their unity was shattered as the center stumbled, but many carried forward unimpeded.

The great rush of shields clashed with the spearmen, casting many to the ground. Some of the spears found their way past the shields, and some of the elves did genuinely impale themselves. Things became chaotic quickly. Argrave directed the knights beside him to step forward and attack. He dared not use [Writhing Lightning] when they were just a heap of bodies as they were.

Argrave saw something moving atop the palisade and turned his head. The archers had fallen, it seemed. The Veidimen came atop the palisades, brandishing their weapons. Shortly after, Anneliese came to stand, surveying the battlefield.

Two of the snow elves broke off from the rest and pursued Argrave, both wielding Ebonice axes. The knights were separated from him, so Argrave stepped back to gain some distance, holding his Ebonice axe in front. His eyes widened as he recognized

one of them; Vorath, the original commander of the occupants in Barden. He was both a mage and a warrior, though only a D-rank mage.

Argrave pranced about, keeping his distance from the two elves and keeping his eye on Anneliese at the palisade. Both his foes had Ebonice, and he was running low on magic. He dared not move recklessly. Vorath and his companion were wary, watching Argrave's hands as though expecting him to cast a spell.

Seeing they were so cautious, Argrave stood still to bait an action. In his peripheries, he saw Anneliese preparing a spell. He did not turn his head to face it, doing his best to appear ignorant of her actions. A spear of ice formed, and Anneliese propelled the aptly named C-rank spell, [Ice Spear], towards Argrave.

At the last second, he turned his body towards the ice spear, holding his hand out. Trying to break it with the Ebonice would only break his arm; instead, he did what he had been doing to all of the projectiles thrown at him. He redirected it with a D-rank wind spell. It veered away, flying towards Vorath and his companion. Both leapt away, but the spear stabbed the one Argrave did not know in the leg, pinning him to the ground.

Argrave seized the initiative, striding past the fallen snow elf and towards Vorath. The former commander was calm. He raised the Ebonice axe in the air to swing down at Argrave, but in his other hand behind the shield, a spell matrix formed. A wave of fire erupted, but Argrave expected this. He slashed at it with the Ebonice axe, dispelling the magic and dropping the axe to free his hand.

His plan disrupted, Vorath swung his axe down at Argrave's shoulder. Argrave held one hand up and cast [Wind Knife] towards the man's wrist. Blood spurted and the axe fell from his hands, but it still retained its momentum, cutting Argrave's back as it fell. Argrave staggered but kept his bearings enough to use his other hand to cast [Wind Knife] on Vorath's neck to finish him. The two collapsed next to each other, one dead.

Argrave sat up, pushing Vorath's corpse away. He reached for his back to close the wound with healing magic but realized it would be the last of his magic. He might need what little remained to hold back Anneliese. Though he turned to look, the elven spellcaster was gone from the palisade.

He stood, turning his sights towards the militiamen. There, he witnessed a knight finish off the last of the snow elves. Two spearmen and one knight were all that remained. Argrave swallowed his pain, drinking another potion and advancing forward. He grabbed the Ebonice axe that had cut his back.

"Everyone! We follow Ryles' knights, rejoin with them!" Argrave shouted.

"But Barden—" the knight began.

"You expect us to throw ourselves against the palisade with only four? Regroup. Get away from their throwing range. They are already behind the walls."

Argrave would not dare say it aloud, but he was glad they were behind the walls. It would give them more time for Galamon to finish his task, and some little time to recover his magic.

The real question lies in if Ryles' group defeated the second ship. If they fell... Argrave shook his head. Ryles had lived through the assault on Barden before, even if he lost the village. He must live through it again. Things would be different in this reality.

Chapter 29: Walkthrough: Galamon%

Galamon grabbed the large mass of stone with both of his hands, using his legs to lift it from below. It shifted upwards easier than he thought it would, and he tossed it into the mineshaft behind him. A few fragments of rock fell when the rock was removed, but there was an entryway large enough for him to enter. He had taken off all his weapons except for his Ebonice axe, completely adhering to Argrave's directions.

He crouched low, walking awkwardly forward. He did not need to do so for long. The small passage opened up into a vast room. Galamon stood. He could see everything clearly, and he acknowledged that Argrave had been right to send him; even with a torch or magic lamp, this place would be difficult to navigate. Galamon could not sense any blood nor sense any movements. Nothing in this place was alive.

The room was very open, barring the pillars holding the mountain above up. The central walkway was a neatly polished gray stone and had many branching paths. Beside the walkways, lined up in perfect rows, were rectangular stairways that descended to an altar. Each of these altars, of which there must have been a hundred, were filled with various objects: weapons, gold, gems, and other such earthly treasures.

Nothing was alive, to be sure, but the creatures that Argrave had described filled the place. The tomb guardians sat behind the altars, each in an identical cross-legged pose. They held a weapon across their laps, heads drooping over them as though bowing or sleeping. Their bodies were wholly metal and decidedly anthropomorphic but they lacked any distinguishing features beyond that.

Briefly bewildered, Galamon took out his flask and held it to his lips. He drained the entire thing, and then put it back in its place. He set off into a steady, certain walk, running Argrave's directions through his head. He was careful to watch his step so that he did not kick anything. A rock might hit one of the altars if kicked, and the situation

could quickly get out of hand. Above all, Galamon could not waste time dealing with one of the awakened guardians.

The path wound confusingly. Try as he might to remember where he came from, most of the place looked the same, and that only deepened his reliance on Argrave's directions. They included an escape route and everything. If the man had been lying to him, Galamon would be in dire straits. He had come to trust Argrave, though he was at times annoying.

Before long, Galamon stood at a set of stairs that led upwards. Pillars stretched for dozens of feet above, holding the great mass of ceiling at bay. Galamon took the stairs two steps at a time, and he arrived at a great open portion of room. A royal red carpet that had degraded over the passage of years led to a single massive altar. There was a king's ransom in gold, jewels, and magic artifacts. Behind it was a metal guardian larger than most of what Galamon had seen.

He gave the glistening pile of wealth a large berth, walking until he stood in front of the tomb guardian. Argrave had said this man was a dead king; true to his word, a crown hung from the brow. Galamon took a deep breath, running through Argrave's directions one last time. They seemed ridiculous, like a child's game. But Argrave had assured that this strategy worked 'two hundred percent of the time,' whatever that meant.

Galamon identified every aspect of the plan—scouted out everything Argrave had mentioned, and took mental note of the closest tomb guardians that had bows—and then he reached both of his hands out, hovering just beside the crown. He moved his hands quickly, touching his fingers to the circlet and yanking it off.

"The crown's a pretty good artifact. Bolsters your st—er, your physical abilities considerably. Leave your helmet outside, and just toss that baby on," Argrave's voice rang through Galamon's head.

He put the crown on and leapt back. Galamon leapt much further than he intended and crashed into the pile of gold—the physical enhancements were considerable indeed. The tomb guardian raised his head, standing and lifting the gargantuan sword off its lap. He heard metal clanking behind him, as though a thousand blacksmiths came to life.

"Run behind the boss, and head for the left corner of the room. The pillars there are pretty close together, and the big guy won't be able to fit."

Galamon sprinted forward and jumped off the altar, easily dodging a slow swing from the tomb's king. He headed for the set of pillars, and then squeezed into them.

"Once you're there, the king'll probably come and try to reach you, banging his sword against the pillars. They're quite strong—they've been holding up a mountain for a

thousand years, after all. All you need to do is wait. Eventually some of the little guys'll come near."

Hiding behind one of the pillars as instructed, Galamon watched as the king slammed the greatsword against the pillars. He watched for cracks, fearing they were not as sturdy as Argrave estimated, but there was not a one. He poked his head out, watching for the progress of the tomb guardians. A purple projectile soared through the air, and Galamon brought his head back in, inhaling sharply.

The projectile impaled into the wall, and Galamon recognized that it took the shape of an arrow. It sunk in very deep—nearly a foot—and then fragmented into purple shards before dissipating entirely. Galamon took another deep breath to calm himself. He waited as the big king slammed his sword against the pillars in unintelligent attempts to get at him.

One of the guardians drew near enough to swing at Galamon. He dodged, stepping back until his back was against the wall.

"Once the tomb's guardians get close enough, you'll want to go to the opposite corner, keeping within the pillars. Just keep hugging the wall, and head for the stairs. It should be a tight pinch—you want them bunched up like that. If it's too tight, just jump. The crown should let you, even with that heavy armor."

Galamon sprinted for the opposite corner. Behind him, the archers shot the wall, leaving foot-deep stabs. Galamon drew his Ebonice, just in case; according to Argrave, what they conjured was pure magic, and so unlike some elemental magics, it would dissipate immediately when touching Ebonice.

Practically flying down the stairs, Galamon kept close to the wall and took a sharp left when he came to the bottom. He kept behind the pillars as instructed. One projectile came close, but he swatted it aside with the axe, surprised by his own speed.

"Just keep hugging the wall. Eventually, you'll go off into another room, but it has two entrances back to the main hall. If you stay in the leftmost corner, you'll give the tomb guardians enough time to shamle away from the mineshaft's entry point. In other words, hide behind the pillars again, waiting for them to group together."

A crowd of the tomb guardians blocked the wall ahead, but Galamon could see the room Argrave described just beyond it. He hastened his run, and then jumped as hard as he could, soaring above them. After clearing them considerably, he landed, his legs jolting from the impact. He started running again, and he did not stop until he reached the spot that Argrave had designated.

"This second room is a long hallway, in essence. It breaks off from the main room and has two entryways; the one you'll enter from, and the one that connects back near the entrance. It was constructed to accommodate more bodies once the main room was filled, but their civilization died before they had the chance to use it. As such, empty."

"Hurry up and wait," Galamon muttered to himself, keeping his eye on what was ahead. The great mass of tomb guardians slowly entered into the room, shambling towards his position. They moved about as fast as he walked, but they were devilishly strong and their bowmen caused problems. The king stood in the back, twice as large as the rest but unable to proceed past the mob that had formed ahead of him.

"You should probably wait until the king enters the room fully. That's usually the proper cue for when to skedaddle."

Galamon watched and waited. The bulk of the archers were also behind the mob, meaning that they could not fire at him. He waited until a few seconds after the king had crossed the threshold, and then bolted. Innumerable projectiles flew at Galamon—too many to work out a path to dodge and dispel with Ebonice. He considered how to dodge them, but then he simply jumped. He cleared all of them handily, and one of the altars shattered into dust and pebbles when the arrows struck behind him.

After this, Galamon ran unimpeded for the opposite side of the hallway. The archers did fire more at him, but their attacks were too far away to have any considerable accuracy. He found the exit to the room, walking back into the main hall. He saw the light shimmering in from the mineshaft and rushed towards it.

One of the guardians bearing a sword lunged at Galamon as he ran. He tried to parry the blow, but it stabbed him in the shoulder and he dropped the axe. He pulled his arm free, deliberating between the axe and the exit. Ultimately, he decided to move towards the exit. The wound had already stopped bleeding, and he felt his vampiric blood stir as the injury closed itself. He reached for his second flask, draining it of blood and sating himself before his instincts could consume him. He had none left after this, but the worst was over.

I'll be sure to make that beanpole reimburse me for that axe, Galamon thought to himself, dodging a purple arrow that flew past. He came to the entrance, ducking into a graceful slide that delivered him right into the mineshaft. There, he grabbed his helmet and his weapons, stringing them to his person as quick as his fingers could manage.

He moved as fast as the close confines of the mineshaft would allow, moving towards where he sensed air was coming from. It was not long before he was outside. He took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Once you’re out, just set off riding. They’ve got... magical tracking on the crown, you see. The big guy will get stuck at the entrance, seething, while our favorite frozen freaks will chase you towards Barden. There, I’ll either be dead, dying, or starting to form an ego after holding back a Veidimen raiding party.”

I lived. That felt wrong, somehow. Cheap, Galamon mused. He walked to the horse, untying its reins from the rock he’d attached it to. He leapt on, spurring the horse forward. He took off the crown and threw his helmet on to hide his elven ears. He looked behind, scanning the cave’s entrance. It took some time, but the metal things started to emerge from the mine.

Let’s see if I find a corpse or a hero.

Chapter 30: First Contact

Anneliese watched the four survivors run to rejoin the detached group of better-armed men. That the defending force had a mage was an unexpected variable, but she adapted to it as best she could. The man was formidable. He killed the former commander and led to the deaths of dozens of others. Those thoughts gave her a pit in her stomach; Patriarch Dras had given Anneliese command to evaluate her after she spoke up at the gathering, and her first task was not a clean victory.

“We’ve won, Commander Anneliese,” one of the snow elves said formally.

“Have we?” she asked, watching them walk away from the makeshift platform beside the palisades. “The second ship’s fate is not decided, but chasing after them now would probably be fruitless. Losing two ships worth of Veidimen for this village...”

“Our task was to secure a landing for further troops. We have succeeded in that. All that remains is holding this position.”

Anneliese turned to look at his face, gauging his emotion. His breathing was fast, but he did not turn away from her gaze. After further examination without seeing any signs of anger, she judged he was not discontent with the battle.

“Had you not made the call to kill the archers immediately, all would have died on the shores,” the elf continued, oblivious to her scrutiny.

Anneliese turned away, stepping off the platform. “We may not have enough men to hold this place. The humans are barricaded in their homes now, but should things change...”

"If they were resigned to die, they would have joined their soldiers in defense of their village. Let them cower in their homes." The elf jumped down after her and kicked one of the houses. A panicked yelp came out from within.

"Kick a hornet's nest, tempt many hornets' wrath," she scolded, looking at the man coldly. "We are to preside over these people as subjects, not enslave them. Behave, or you will be punished."

The elf paused, and Anneliese moved past him. Her gaze moved from place to place, surveying the docks and the damage that had been done with the ship. The longship was floating still, but the front half was suspended above the water, balanced precariously on broken wood. If it were to enter the water, Anneliese was sure it would sink. The other ship was aflame, and could not be salvaged.

She heard a loud split and presumed one section of the docks had broken. Wood splinters striking her cheek made her turn her head. One of the palisades had been knocked over, badly deformed but barely standing. She saw a flash of dissipating purple, but nothing after that.

A few shouts made her walk to the palisade. She peered beyond the broken one. She saw a whirl of movement, and only after did she process that a horseman had just rode by. She grabbed one of the stakes and pulled herself up, peeking over the side. To the right, a horseman galloped off towards the humans. Behind...

Behind, there was a mass of shining metal. Anneliese's heart jumped into her stomach. She assumed they were knights for a moment, the sunlight reflecting off their polished steel as a great crowd of men moved to reclaim the village. But their movements were jerky, and further scrutiny showed that they lacked joints. They looked like metal men.

Another purple projectile shot forward, and Anneliese dropped down. It hit the dirt, creating a great cloud of dust from the sheer force. She briefly saw an arrow before it dissipated into nothingness.

"The human trap...?" she questioned. Most of the Veidimen ran to the palisades, examining what exactly was firing at them. Anneliese sprinted over to the other side, pulling open the gate and looking out at the crowd of humans.

The horseman rode across the plains, slowing the horse before dismounting it beside the distant party. Not many were left living; ten, by her count, the mage, the rider, six knights, and two spearmen. The mage walked ahead of the rest of them. Some of the purple arrows fired, but he dispelled them by casually blocking with the Ebonice axe.

"The two are enemies...?" Anneliese scrutinized further. She watched the human mage step closer, appearing casual. He raised his arms above him, fists clenched, until they formed a V. Then, he closed the V repeatedly, touching his knuckles together. Even this far away, Anneliese could distinguish a vague hint of triumph on his face.

"A Veelstron sign. He brought this horde here to force collaboration?" Anneliese's mind worked quickly, but those things approaching seemed mindless and hostile. Would the man rather lose the village than the battle?

Nevertheless, she returned the sign. If the man had caused this horde, it stood to reason he would be the key to ending it.

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"Wizard Argrave, what are you doing?" Ryles yelled. "What is that horde?"

"This is a sign for parley," Argrave explained, keeping his head facing forward. "Those things are monsters. The Veidimen have a tradition of collaborating in the face of danger—snowstorms, big beasts, the like."

"Collaborating?" Ryles demanded, stepping forward. "You brought those things here?! Explain yourself!"

"I did! Well, my friend did, actually, but I ordered him to." Argrave responded. Galamon stepped behind Argrave, placing himself between Ryles and Argrave.

"What were you thinking?!" Ryles walked forward, but Galamon held him back.

"I was thinking I could find a way to get them to vacate Barden, and perhaps all of Berendar," Argrave said back.

"So we should set aside arms, work with those we were killing moments ago?" Ryles insisted. "You're a madman!"

"I showed you the Mark of Monticci. I work for the Duke directly; I am one of his principal agents. This is part of the Duke's plan." Argrave turned around, pushing past Galamon. He handed his Ebonice axe to Galamon and grabbed Ryles' shoulders. "If I do nothing, not just Mateth, but all of House Monticci will fall. This has to be done. I am going to stop this invasion in its tracks."

He could hear the knight's breathing from beneath the helmet, rapid and angered. Eventually, the man pulled free from Argrave's grip and returned to his knights.

"I refuse to come with you. If you are confident going, then go."

"Then will you help against the metal men?"

"Yes," Ryles spoke, angry. "For the sake of the Duke's plan, if nothing else. But I don't like this."

Argrave nodded. He tapped Galamon's shoulder. "Let's go."

The two started walking across the plains. Argrave saw Anneliese waiting; he was quite pleased they did not fight, as she was a helpful person in killing Gerechtigheit.

The battle was not over, though. With their parley coming so close, Argrave realized the biggest issue, presently, was dispatching the vast horde of tomb guardians come to reclaim the crown.

Depending on how this talk goes, this could be very hard or quite easy.

"You lived," Galamon commented. "How's the ego?"

Argrave could not muster a laugh. He felt like vomiting, truthfully. The experience had been intense. "I could say the same for you. Jesus, that was hard-fought. The idiot back there ditched just because we were holding our own. We very nearly lost."

"I lost my axe." Galamon held up the one Argrave had handed him. "I was going to make you pay for a new one... but you gave me this."

"Lucky me." Argrave looked ahead, where Anneliese half-jogged towards them. He saw her fully for the first time. Her amber eyes were bright, but her incredibly long white hair was stained with dirt and some blood.

Argrave turned back to Galamon, tapping his breastplate with his knuckle. "By the way, keep that crown hidden. We don't want them to know they're chasing you."

Galamon nodded. "If I throw it back to them, will they leave?"

"Not really. They're hostile to all life at this point."

"Unfortunate." Galamon stopped, holding Argrave back as Anneliese drew nearer.

"Hello, Anneliese," Argrave shouted. That brought her to a stop.

At a fair distance, Anneliese spoke back, "How do you know my name?"

"The same way I know the Veelstron sign. Do you think the Veidimen are the only one capable of spying on the enemy?" Argrave said. "But we're wasting time talking. I'm Argrave, this is Galamon. You may know him."

Her face was passive. She was very good at keeping her expressions in check, Argrave knew. Even her amber eyes stayed still. "Then the druids..." she paused. "This horde. You brought it? Can it be stopped?"

Argrave smiled. "Yes, it can. Unfortunately, miss Anneliese hunted the archers, throwing a massive wrench in my strategy and leading to most of the men dying. Consequently, I will need your full cooperation for this to be as easy as I hoped."

"I cannot apologize. It was my duty." She shook her head.

"Your duty is ridiculous, then. Your duty is the reason why this world's cycle might come to an end," Argrave said, hamming his speech up. "While you wage this senseless war, He Who Would Judge the Gods stirs. That is why I created this situation."

"You're feigning anger," Anneliese returned. Argrave felt exposed and uncomfortable, his acting being so blatantly called out. "He Who Would Judge the Gods? Is this true?" Anneliese looked to Galamon.

Galamon nodded. "He is the mortal agent of Erlebnis, the Hand Reaching from the Abyss. He seeks to stop Gerechtigkeit. During my employment, he has been struggling towards that end."

Argrave looked to Galamon, surprised that the elf could pull out such a quality story from thin air. *Wow. I should have thought of that sooner. I was too busy trying to avoid that name. I should have just embraced it.* He saw the elf looked very serious. *Or... maybe this isn't a con. Come to think of it...*

Anneliese showed genuine surprise for the first time, and spoke before Argrave's thoughts could wander. "You speak truly? This is... unimaginable."

"Erlebnis is one of those gods on trial. I am his defense." Argrave took a step forward. "As such, in return for our aid, I would expect to be taken to Patriarch Dras. This invasion needs to cease. The living races of the world need to preserve their strength for the ancient calamity. That is my task, my duty." Argrave held his hand to his chest where the bronze hand mirror lay in his pocket.

Anneliese looked back to the horde of metal men behind. Then, she turned back. "I have no choice in the matter, given what you've brought, but I would still agree. If Galamon the Great would speak for you, I believe you are not being dishonest. The ancient calamity takes precedence over all; such is as Veid teaches."

Anneliese spent a long time thinking, staring at the dirt with a distant stare in her eyes. Argrave waited patiently.

Eventually, she nodded. "We will allow your men in. I will explain to mine what is happening. We will make a contract ironing out the details."

"Just like that?" Argrave asked incredulously. "Well, I won't complain."

"I believe you are not lying. Someone ordinary could not bring these things here. As I said, I have no choice," she emphasized. "More is lost from indecision."

"Then I will speak to my own." Argrave nodded. He turned on his heel and walked back towards the party, back still stinging with pain.

"Hey, listen, Galamon..."

Galamon looked at Argrave as they walked.

"I know I just asked you to lure them over and all, and that was a very difficult task that I'm immeasurably thankful you did..." Argrave paused.

"But?" Galamon prodded, hefting the Ebonice axe in his hand.

"Well, there's maybe thirty of us total including the Veidimen. You've got this nifty little crown on you that attracts their attention, you're probably the best warrior here, I replaced your Ebonice axe..."

"So?" Galamon ran his finger across the axe's edge.

"If you could distract them while we prepare... for a little," Argrave proceeded, making hand gestures. "A long while, maybe. We could probably win. If not... we'll all be quite dead."

Galamon shook his head as they walked. "I'm starting to feel less pity for that cut on your back."

Argrave looked to Galamon. "I hope that means 'yes, I will do it.'"

Galamon nodded. Argrave let out a sigh of relief. He turned his head to look at Galamon. "But how can you tell I was injured...?"

"Beyond the split clothing? I can smell the blood. It makes me--"

"Forget I asked," Argrave interrupted. "Let's just get going." He hastened his steps. Galamon reached up to his arm, massaging where he'd been stabbed, before moving to catch up with Argrave.