

# Jackal Among Snakes

## Chapter 31: Machine Learning

If one was suddenly placed in a situation where they needed to dispatch near a hundred animated corpses coated in metal and capable of bending steel with their hands, they might not be able to come up with a solution. That was doubly true if they were entirely out of magic when confronting this situation.

Argrave had faced worse odds. Granted, it had been within a game, and there was no imminent death in the case of failure.

One of the main reasons people were able to do much more in games than in real life was because of the limitations imposed by artificial intelligence. NPCs could not act like truly real people. They were incapable of making judgements and responding to the situation accordingly. They had to be programmed, and that programming could only account for so many scenarios. Once one learns vaguely how the AI functions, it becomes easy to overcome insurmountable odds. You can manipulate the AI into poor situations.

These tomb guardians could be compared to artificial intelligence. Though Argrave had thought while planning this might be a big hurdle, all he needed was time.

Argrave peered through a small hole in the palisades out at the crowd of tomb guardians. Though they had been headed straight for Barden, they now veered away, following after a lone figure: Galamon. He rode on horseback, circling around them and deflecting the odd magic arrow that came near him.

"We just need to wait," Argrave said, leaning against the palisade as he stared out. "If we move too soon, the archers will take notice of us and fire. Those things are indiscriminate butchers."

"You're placing Galamon in much danger," Anneliese commented.

Argrave turned his head around. He was surrounded by Veidimen. It felt strange being around them. With them, he felt as though he was average height again. With the pale skin, they might as well be kin.

"He's tough, and he's the only one I can trust with this. Besides, worst-case scenario, vampires can regenerate, and are much more physically capable than most. You should know this."

Anneliese nodded. "It is merely disquieting. He is a great figure."

"Yet the Veidimen exiled him," Argrave stepped away from the palisade.

"He is still respected, even if Veid has punished him. I study his strategies."

"It shows," Argrave said. "Without your quick decision, things would have gone much differently."

"I did not do enough." Anneliese crossed her arms. "The battle should not have been so close."

"What would you have done differently?" Argrave asked, curious to hear some insights from a future prominent strategist.

Anneliese did not take long to consider. "I would have tried to kill you as quickly as possible. Your magic sealed the first landing party's fate. I did not think the commander would be willing to sally out of the palisades and onto the beaches. Things would have been much easier if you had remained within the walls."

Argrave smiled. He walked away and sat on a wooden crate that looked stable. "I left an impression, I see."

"You were a good commander. Most believe Galamon was behind the attack on our druid scouts. I see now that may be otherwise." Anneliese stood before the sitting Argrave, keeping her eye on the distant mob. "I am surprised you are not with the humans."

Anneliese looked at the crowd of knights, who were ensuring the safety of the citizens. They were very leery of the snow elves—not that Argrave could blame them, exactly. Unlike the Veidimen, the humans were not used to setting aside conflicts to cooperate in the face of a greater threat.

Argrave's smile turned bitter. "I wasn't the commander, merely an advisor. That incompetent moron nearly killed us all by allowing us to deal with the first landing party alone. If there had been more time to prepare..."

"You sit with a strange posture. You're hurt," Anneliese said suddenly. "Your back. Turn around."

"What? Why?"

She stepped forward. "You should be healed."

Argrave waved her away incredulously. "Save your magic. It will be needed."

"I will do as I please." She took another step closer. "Our contract does not dictate what I do with my magic."

Argrave frowned, overwhelmed by her intensity. He slowly did as she asked. Anneliese held her hand out, and he felt an odd sensation like razor burn along his backside. The pain from the cut faded.

"Mmm. Thank you." Argrave moved his back around, getting used to the feeling. "I'll remember that you spent your magic to relieve me of some minor pain when we die terribly due to a lack of spells."

"Why? Have no confidence in your plan?" she rebuked.

Argrave laughed. "No, it should work just fine. Not much magic will be needed, actually." Argrave looked back out at the slowly fading mob. "Want to know what those things are?"

Anneliese nodded.

"They're corpses, coated in metal. It's steel, I think, but that's not important. They're reanimated by magic. Bludgeon them, sever limbs, stab them, crush them—those things don't work, really. Not only is it very hard to pierce the metal, losing parts doesn't matter to them. They'll crawl after you if you've severed all their limbs. The key is targeting the magic that's reanimating them."

Argrave leaned back, placing his back against a house. "Magic is about the most painful thing for them, but Ebonice does the job nicely. Pierce their skin with Ebonice, it'll be like a balloon popping—the things fall over like a house of cards, and we're crawling away from Tartarus back to cloud nine. The things are devilishly strong, despite their slowness. All we need to do is restrict their mobility. That's why we needed time." Argrave pointed at Anneliese.

"To set up those restrictions." Anneliese waved her hands, going along with Argrave's thought process.

"Precisely," Argrave snapped his fingers, but the gloves he wore made no noise come out. "Shouldn't be too much longer. Galamon will give us all the time we need. He's reliable like that."

"There's something I don't understand."

"How can I enlighten you?" Argrave spread his arms wide.

"Why bother killing them?" She paused, and Argrave furrowed his brows in confusion. She elaborated further. "You could have Galamon lure them away to one of the other Veidimen landing parties, have them descend on an unwitting group. You could simply leave them somewhere far out in the wilderness. So why?"

"It's common sense to clean up after yourself when you make a mess." Argrave said, then shook his head with a light laugh.

He looked back to the horde of metal monsters, now fading in the distance. "Those things, if left unattended, will cause a lot of problems for a lot of people. The cat is out of the bag, and now it's time to skin it. I don't want anyone to die, really, neither Veidimen nor human. Gerechtigkeis is what's important. And so... I'll take care of those frozen freaks."

"You have no loyalty to your people?"

"Humans?" Argrave turned his head to the side. "Never really thought of it. As far as I'm concerned, a human is just what I happen to be. We're all animals, despite how some would raise themselves above that label. All that matters is character. Galamon is of good character. As are you. As are many others, regardless of vague separations. Unfortunately, greed and stigma cause differences to escalate into conflict."

Anneliese lowered her head, thinking. She asked a question.

"Do you think you are of good character?"

Argrave opened his mouth, but he found that he had no answer.

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Galamon rode the horse steadily, so as not to exhaust it. The beast was admirable, keeping such composure near a massive mob of enemies. The tomb guardians followed him closely behind. Galamon needed to keep a constant eye on them. The archers, of which he counted around fifteen, constantly fired on his position. Generally, the movement of the horse was enough to keep him from being hit. At times, he would need to swat aside the magic arrows that came too near.

*"The archers, every time they fire, are actually killing themselves. The magic they conjure has to come from somewhere, and they take it from the source that keeps them alive. I need you to ride until you stop receiving fire. If you keep a close eye, you might be able to see them keel over."*

Galamon might have been skeptical of Argrave's directions in the past, but now that he had escaped the tomb as easily as he did, he did not doubt them in the slightest. The boy was talented; even if he had knowledge vested in him by Erlebnis, formulating plans based on that knowledge was not an easy matter.

Two arrows soared towards Galamon. His senses came alert instantly, and he tried to swat both out of the air. The first was handily dispersed, but the second hit at the feet of the horse. A cloud of dirt exploded into the air, startling the horse. It reared, rushing forward. Another projectile came, and the horse's movements made him barely miss it.

It struck Galamon in the gut, and pain consumed him. He looked down at the wound. The arrow had torn through near half of his torso. He grunted in pain, letting the horse take him away from the mob. He grabbed at his flasks, but he could smell that they were empty. He hadn't prepared enough.

"Damn," he cursed. The wound was starting to close, but it was so severe that it roused his vampiric instincts. He felt his rationality slipping away, undermined by a fell beast that desired him to be a slave to his cravings.

He grabbed his neck and squeezed tightly, so tightly that no air could escape. *Have to hold on. Long enough to get the job done. Then... plenty of corpses on the beaches.* The thought set the beast within stirring once more. *Can... no, don't think of blood. Think of the task. Do your duty.*

With no uncursed-blood coursing through him, the sun burned Galamon's newly healed flesh. He kept his eyes on the mob. Three arrows rushed towards him, and he swatted them away with a wild ferocity he lacked previously. His movements were free of the military efficiency he generally possessed, replaced by that of an animal's instinctual movements.

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"This seems... vaguely ridiculous," Anneliese commented. She held her hands out, and a great mound of earth rose up, forming a wall.

Argrave stood behind Anneliese, directing her earth magic. "How so?" Already, there was a formidable earth maze with five entrances that converged into one walkway, wide enough for one to pass.

"These creatures will just allow themselves to walk into this maze, be herded into one point?"

Argrave looked at the now-distant horde of tomb guardians. "Calling them 'creatures' makes it seem like they're alive. They're animated by magic, and they respond to living thing's magic. They track things by sensing it. There's limits to that, though. They can sense magic through walls, but if it were just that, they would swing at walls. They only attack when they are certain no impediment stands between them and their target. As such, lurking at the end of a narrow entryway and herding them into it is the best choice for dispatching them."

“What’s to say they won’t walk around, climb over, or any other number of things?”

Argrave moved down, walking to the open gate of Barden. “We won’t be killing them at the maze. We’ll be killing them at the gate to Barden. This maze is just designed to thin the rate at which they get to it, so that they don’t climb over the palisades. As long as walking is less time-consuming, the tomb guardians will never climb over things.”

In truth, the directions Argrave had given Galamon to guide him through the tomb was a common method to herd all of the guardians into the narrow entryway of the mineshaft. This way, the player could dispatch them one by one as they emerged, reaping experience en masse. This plan at the gate of Barden was merely a modified version of that.

“Once they come sauntering to the gate, we have two Veidimen standing by like butchers in a slaughterhouse, chopping at whatever walks through with an Ebonice weapon.” Argrave emulated the motion. “We should probably dig a little ditch so that the bodies don’t stack up large enough to stop them from coming...”

“Commander Anneliese,” the Veidimen on scout duty called out. “The human’s companion is returning. The fire from the archers appears to have ceased.”

Argrave smiled. “Well, we’d best hurry, hadn’t we? A brawl is surely brewing.”

## Chapter 32: Blood Drive

Galamon rode his horse onwards, leaning on its head. He felt the exposed flesh on his torso burn, and now that the archers had perished and deprived him of distraction, he could feel the pain of the sunlight. He tried to focus on the pain to drive away the bestial curse of vampirism swirling through his blood. He kept his eyes fixed on the wooden palisades ahead. It was not much longer before his task would be finished.

When he came near, he jumped from the horse. It neighed in pain, and the sheer force toppled the creature to the ground. Galamon cleared the wooden stakes easily, crashing amidst some jars full of water. He heard screams from the houses beside him—they sounded loud, so sharp were his senses. He crawled away from the sunlight like a deranged spider, retreating further into the shadows.

He could smell blood all around him. The smell of the ocean wind carried it. He could smell it seeping into the wooden planks at the docks, could smell it in the earth, the grass... he kept his hand on his neck, squeezing tightly. The world seemed tinted red. Galamon kept to the shadows, waiting until the beast realized it was caged; that he owned it, not the other way around.

He heard rushed footfalls heading towards him, and with it, a scent of blood. He heard the heartbeat—frantic, fast, driven by fear and excitement.

“Galamon,” a voice called out. “Hot damn. I knew you could do it.”

*It’s calling for me*, Galamon noticed. *The heartbeat is calling for me.*

“Listen. I know that you just finished with that one thing, but I don’t have time to mince words. Where are you? Damned dark back here. Could you come out?”

*It wants me to come out. It’s not afraid of what might happen.*

Galamon lunged forward towards the welcoming voice, throwing his helmet aside. He grasped the prey and fell on it. His sharp teeth sunk into something hot, and he drank. It tasted sweet—like a cup of water after traversing a desert, or a piece of meat after a long hunt. This was the best feeling, Galamon supposed.

His prey struggled with weak, vain hits at his side, pushing and struggling. Galamon did not care. He held on tightly, enjoying the blood. This seemed especially pure and powerful—a mages’ blood, he could tell. It had a faint tinge to it—magic in the blood.

“Think...” the voice whispered, struggling against Galamon.

*Think of what?* Galamon pondered.

“Would your family... want this?”

Galamon’s mind spun, and his world of red shattered. He looked down and saw his brother, battered and broken, bleeding from the neck. The image slowly faded, and Argrave’s face replaced his brother’s.

Galamon tossed Argrave away and leapt back, in panic. He slammed his back against the house’s wall. Argrave crawled away, holding his still-bleeding neck.

“By Veid... I-I...” Galamon gingerly reached forward. Argrave stared at him with hollow gray eyes.

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Argrave watched Galamon. The unshakable elf was, for the first time Argrave had ever seen, panicking. He tried to think of something witty to say, but his neck stung, and his brain felt like it had a heavy fog over it. Lethargy threatened to consume him, his breathing was too fast, and he felt dreadfully weak. He blinked and bit his lips, knowing that sleeping here might mean his death.

Galamon rushed forward, reaching into Argrave's satchel. He pulled free a stamina potion, and then held it to Argrave's lips with trembling fingers. Argrave caught it with his teeth and tilted his head back. It did not make the pain diminish, nor stop the bleeding, but it did allow him to regain his focus.

Argrave used the last of his magic to cast healing magic, sealing the wound. Galamon collapsed backwards, staring at Argrave with an all-too-complicated expression. Panic, fear, guilt, anger... it was a veritable salad of regret.

"Whew," Argrave sighed with a hoarse voice. "I knew you were dissatisfied, but you proved your point."

"It was not my intent to... the beast... it battered, twisted..."

"I know," said Argrave. "I know."

Galamon sat there, mouth agape. Those fangs of his looked very ominous now that they had bitten a piece of him off.

"You run one hell of a blood drive. I hope I'm the right blood type for the donor." Argrave tried to stand, but he collapsed amidst a shattered pot. His muscles were cramped.

Galamon stood, trying to help Argrave but hesitant to approach. It was very evident he was afraid of hurting him.

"Damn it. Can't stand," Argrave complained. He took a deep breath, and then looked around. "Came here to tell you you're needed. Take your Ebonice axe, head to the gate. Anneliese can probably position you. Go."

Galamon frowned. "But you need help."

"I'll live. Just a little... drained, that's all." Argrave let out a low, dry laugh. "But seriously... go. The tomb guardians will kill us all if you don't. Anneliese will explain things. Look for the beautiful woman with long white hair. Wait... you met her already. Can't think straight."

"Argrave... I-I'm sorry. I never... my wound just... the curse..." Galamon stammered.

"I knew the risks when I hired you. Stop talking. Move your feet. Make use of the blood I so graciously donated. You could probably use it better than me right now, anyway." Argrave laid his head against the wall.

After watching for a time, Galamon picked up his Ebonice axe from where he'd dropped it, and then ran to the gate as Argrave instructed. Argrave laid there, biting his lips to ensure he didn't fall asleep.

*It's like those people that try to take wild animals as pets. Tigers are cool enough, sure, but eventually, they'll remind you that they're wild animals, just like vampires are killers.* Argrave bent his knees, then placed his feet against the ground, anchoring them. He put his hand to the wall, slowly rising to his feet.

Argrave managed to come to his feet with a grunt. His legs felt as weak as clouds, as though they could fail at any minute and send him crashing back to the ground. *If I hadn't been able to remember that Galamon's family was the only thing keeping him anchored to life, I doubt I would have been able to draw him from that state.*

With one shaky step after the other, Argrave walked forward, arm held against the side of the wall for support. His breaths were quick and rapid, and he could feel his heart struggling. He passed the corner of the house and fell against a barrel, holding himself up shakily. Ahead, the tomb guardians were walking through the gate. Galamon and a few other snow elves were making short work of them.

"One of them... is doing it wrong. He's in line of sight. He's going to die."

Argrave tried to push away from the barrel and go to them, but the barrel moved and he stumbled, collapsing onto the grass. Things went dark.

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Knight Ryles watched the snow elves butcher those men made of metal. The snow elf commander refused to allow them to participate, citing that they were not as strong as Veidimen. Ryles assumed 'Veidimen' was what those abominable elves called themselves.

He turned his head to look at a horse. The wizard Argrave had ridden it into here, assumed the position of an advisor abruptly using the Mark of Monticci, and then enacted this 'cooperation' with the snow elves. The man had been willing to risk life and limb, so Ryles did not question that he came from the Duke's orders. Now that things had proceeded the way they had...

"Knight Symon," Ryles said quietly, staring at the horse.

"Yes, Commander Ryles?"

Ryles strode towards the horse. "Take command. I am going to return to Mateth."

“What, sir? Why?”

“I must tell the duke what has transpired here. Something is off. Though the battle has been postponed, the Wizard has other motives.”

Ryles clambered atop the horse, and then spurred it towards the gate opposite where they were doing battle with the metal creatures. He rode away, passing by the dead bodies left by the recently transpired battle.

*That he is so close with the elves... perhaps it is not a coincidence. It is my duty to take this matter to the Duke, as much as I would wish to stay with my men.*

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“Argrave, wake up!” a voice called.

Argrave blinked open his eyes. He was standing.

“You have to get ready for school,” someone chided him.

“But I don’t go to school,” Argrave answered. “I’m a fantasy man now.”

“Stop acting like a child,” the voice chided again. It was vaguely familiar—female, young.

Argrave was in the school courtyard. He had to go to gym class. He ran around, the environment shifting around him. Everyone was staring at him. He realized he was nude.

He opened the door to the gymnasium. It was wide, as colossal as a stadium. The bleachers were made of stone. Argrave remembered he had to get something from the supply closet. He opened the door to the supply closet and entered.

Someone was sitting by the hearthplace where a fire raged. Argrave walked closer to them. They turned their head. Their eyes had melted away, and their skin was cracked and burned.

“Want a cigarette?” the person held out a cigarette.

“No. I only smoked when I was a teenager,” said Argrave. “My friend was looking for you.”

"No, I was looking for him," the person said. He reached into a bag of popcorn, pulling out a fistful of tiny people. He tossed them into the fire. Their crackling cries were like music in rain. It was a song— 'This Must Be the Place' by Talking Heads.

"You killed me," the man said. He turned back to Argrave.

"I had to," Argrave said.

"It hurt."

"I bet. I can see it on your face."

"I'm going to throw these people in the fire," the man said.

The world shifted. Argrave was sitting above the fire, dangling from a chair hung by a chain. He held a bunch of people in his hands. There were so many—they were slipping out of his hands.

"You can stop this," said the burned man. He was watching from the side.

"I'm trying. There's too many," Argrave said, panicking.

"There's only one way to really stop this."

"How's that?"

"Want a cigarette?" the man held out a very large cigarette.

"Just tell me how!"

The burned man shrugged. "Just jump in. Either way, you'll smoke."

Argrave looked down at the fire. He heard David Byrne's voice from the flames. It repeated, 'I guess I must be having fun,' over and over again.

"It's you or them," the burned man said.

"I don't like getting hurt. I don't want to."

"Either way, you'll smoke." The burned man turned around and walked away.

Argrave stood on the chair. It swung in the air. He took a diver's stance and jumped into the fire.

