

Jackal 161

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Chapter 161: Step on Heads to Rise

Argrave naively estimated the journey back to Vasquer would take ten to twelve days. As it turns out, Argrave was not particularly good at estimating the length of fantasy backpacking trips. The journey took, altogether, seventeen days... and that was only to make it to the mountain highway.

It was not because of slow movement—indeed, Argrave actually found himself enjoying things when they traversed across the black sand dunes. Anneliese had described the Burnt Desert as having an ‘austere beauty,’ before, and Argrave fully agreed with that assessment. Without scarred lungs and weak bones making things agonizing, the hike was pleasant.

But that was when they were hiking.

Though the first week had passed quickly, once they strayed far from Sethia, the air became unbearably dry once again. That dryness brought with it sandstorms. They were stalled by sandstorms twice—the first had lasted but one night, while the second lasted three whole days. They sought shelter within the mountains. Though offering plenty protection, they were too steep to traverse, halting all progress.

Argrave had been worried the second sandstorm would never end, and they would starve. He’d already planned to eat Galamon first. He was sure the elven vampire would agree. But the relentless barrage of black sand did end, eventually, and they finished out the journey.

With a heave, Argrave pulled himself over a cliff onto stark gray plateau, pulling his legs up just after. The movement had been quick and smooth, and he felt some pride as he recalled the climb at the druid’s camp where Galamon had needed to help him up. Every day felt like a gift now that his body had gone from a liability to a reliability.

Anneliese was already waiting with their four Brumesingers, her long braid of white hair whipping about as she turned and examined the architecture of the highway. Argrave turned around, where he received Durran’s backpack. Soon after, the man climbed up, boots scraping against the stone wall. Argrave gestured towards Galamon for his backpack, but the vampire simply climbed up as easily as one might climb out of a swimming pool. Between his plate armor and his heavy pack, such a thing was a ridiculous show of strength.

“Show-off,” Argrave said to Galamon, turning to the highway ahead.

The abundance of gray metal made the highway seem nearly industrial. Metal sconces had once held magic lamps, but salvagers had come through here, stripping each and every scone of their magic light. The closest ones reminded Argrave of exposed rebar. But the road kept winding up the mountain, dangerous cracks and cave-ins marring most of the road. Up high, one could see better maintained bits, where salvagers dared not tread.

The stone road was steep and required climbing at the points where it had collapsed. Iron statues with bizarre faces were half-buried in the rubble. Their faces resembled nutcrackers, though intricately wrought out of now-rusty iron and morphed in exaggerated emotion. They were angry, full of rage—though rather than terrifying, the expressions seemed like mockery.

"I cannot fathom how these highways were used..." Anneliese pondered.

"Transportation of troops between mountainside forts," Argrave stepped up beside her, putting his backpack back on.

"Mountain climbing with heavy packs," Durran said, catching his breath as he leaned against his glaive. "I missed all the signs. I'm travelling with morons."

"Other options; abomination-ridden underground passage jam-packed with diseases, necromantic creatures of the Order of the Rose, and a knightly order who has vilified me," Argrave raised one finger. "Or... we can ask the Lionsun Castle to open the gates for us. Barring these highways, there's no other way over these mountain peaks."

"Underground passage... this is Nodremaid, that city Garm spoke to me about," Durran caught his breath.

Argrave nodded, surprised Durran knew more than he thought. Anneliese walked up to a pile of rubble, touching one of the iron statues. "Don't be so carefree," Argrave called out. "Some of these statues are functioning golems."

"These are the golems you mentioned?" Anneliese asked, surprised. "The Veidimen say golems are myths. And moreover, metal golems..."

"The pathways and fortresses were made by men. The sconces, the golems... they were made by the subterranean mountain people I had intended to enlist against the Vessels in Sethia."

"You did not mention them in our plan for this place," Anneliese noted.

"They're gone, at least from here," Argrave shook his head. "Their creations remain."

Durran looked quite skeptical. Argrave caught him frowning and took note of it but decided to wait for later.

Argrave looked at the steep pathway ahead, feeling trepidatious. *You wanted to work on your body, right?* he gave himself a pep talk internally. *This is your chance. Come on. Kill it.* In truth, it was less 'mountain climbing' and more 'rock scrabbling.' The falls were not inherently deadly, simply painful. The most cumbersome part of the journey was their packs.

During the hour, they advanced no more than a half mile. It was strenuous, both mentally and physically, as they needed to plan out a path up the uneven road and then execute that plan. Durran voiced his skepticism frequently but kept pace with them despite hefting his glaive about. It was Anneliese who struggled the most, though not to an excessive degree. Argrave felt strange when he was not the straggler.

The Brumesingers conjured mist from their fur with a pleasant chiming song, then vanished into it, traversing their brume as they had in the tomb of the southron elves. They would reappear at higher elevations, lounging and playing with each other as though this was a casual stroll rather than a treacherous climb. If Argrave didn't have such affection for the creatures, he might've gotten a headache from annoyance.

Argrave locked his hands together, and Anneliese stepped on them. He boosted her up, and then grabbed her backpack, placing it up beside her. After, he did the same for Durran and his glaive, and then he and Galamon came up last. All save Galamon were breathing heavy. They conjured water with spells, drinking heavily.

"I must ask... for a break," Anneliese gasped out.

Argrave didn't answer, taking his time to catch his breath. After a time, he responded, "Take all the time you need. And rest easy, because that was the last bit of climbing we'll need to do." He straightened his back. "Now that we're up here, I'll stress this—follow me completely. No veering off course."

Ahead, the highway's winding slopes flattened out, finally reaching level ground. The metal statues were much more abundant, and a few of the metal sconces still bore their enchanted glass orbs, even if they were dead by now. Argrave looked back beyond them. From up high, the Burnt Desert was even more beautiful. The distant and elaborate cities of the Vessels seemed like stars in the sky or shining lights in the abyss.

"Long way down," Durran came to stand beside Argrave, leaning forth and placing his elbow on his knee. "Going to be a shame when we have to turn around. No way this makes it all the way across."

Argrave shook his head, only able to muster laughter at Durran's constant derision. After everyone recovered from their fatigue, they gathered their things and pressed onwards.

Anneliese kept her head upwards instead of watching the path ahead, examining the comically angry metal statues they walked by. Though still rusted, they were upright at this higher section, and most bore metal rods in hand. They took ridiculous poses, again intended to mock the warriors they portrayed.

"The top of those rods... something was cut off there, severed. You can tell," she pointed.

"And what was once there?" Argrave pressed amusedly, knowing the answer.

"I am unsure. They could be spears, longmaces... jeweled scepters of some kind, perhaps. It would explain why they have been cut off."

Argrave stayed silent as they trekked forward, a smile on his face.

"Why are you so amused?" she frowned. "You will keep me in the dark?"

Argrave held up a hand to shrug. "You'll see what was there. That's all."

"Some guardian golems, if they just let whatever they held be cut off and stolen," Durran noted a bit sarcastically.

Argrave glanced at Durran, then fished into his pocket. He scanned the nearby statues, then locked his eye on one in particular. He pulled free a silver coin minted in Malgeridum's style and flicked it towards a close golem. As the coin spun by the metal statue he'd had his eye on, its arm rocketed forth and the rod it held slammed into the ground. The coin had been caught perfectly, smushed around the edge of the rod. Its arm clicked like a wind-up toy, cranking back to its original position. The silver coin hung at the edge of the rod, morphed around it.

"These ones are stationary. They attack anything that enters into their line of attack," Argrave smiled. "It gives them greater power."

Durrant stared at the coin, and then glanced at the silver smudge left behind where it had been beaten around the rod.

"Nearly poked one of those things to test it," he said a little hauntedly.

Argrave gave Durrant a pat on the shoulder, then kept walking. The path was rough and poorly maintained, and grass growing up through the stone had left great cracks in everything. Harsh winds were shielded by higher peaks around them.

The path tunneled into a mountain. In that tunnel, the path narrowed, and a thousand statues lined up shoulder to shoulder.

Durrant tapped his glaive against the ground. "Not sure anyone alive can maneuver through that, if those things are all like those metal meat crushers we passed by."

Argrave veered from the center of the road, walking towards one of the statues. "I would never," he scolded, retrieving another coin. He tossed it, and its right arm whirled, slamming the rod in hand against the ground. The rod was thicker than most of the others.

Argrave stepped atop the rod, balancing carefully as it clicked and rose back up. Once it was at its highest point, he stepped off onto the statue's shoulder, then stood on its head.

"Galamon, you're last," Argrave shouted down. "Rescue anyone in case they fall."

Galamon nodded. Durrant seemed thrilled at what Argrave had done, practically beaming in anticipation. He kicked a rock towards the golem, then leapt atop the thick rod once it slammed against the ground. He rode it upwards to the top, and they stayed standing there.

"Anneliese, you go. I'll jump off just before it swings," he suggested eagerly.

Argrave grabbed his glaive and pulled Durrant off the rod, stepping aside to make room atop the statue's head. Durrant nearly lost his balance, but managed to correct himself before it was too late. He looked aggrieved, but Argrave could not be bothered.

Anneliese ascended up next, legs a bit shaky. Argrave moved to the next statue in the long row to accommodate her. Just after, Galamon came, reaching the top just as they had without incident.

Now that they all stood atop the statues, Argrave led. He jumped from statue to statue, stepping on their heads like one might move from rock to rock on a river. They entered into the tunnel, where Argrave's head very nearly touched the ceiling with every jump.

Everyone was deathly quiet, realizing all too well the consequences of falling. After a while, Argrave came to a statue that had a missing head and knelt where its head once was.

"Gods," Durrant exclaimed, coming to a stop. "Got into a rhythm, almost jumped at you. What are you doing?"

Argrave scanned the statues in the adjacent row. His eyes settled on one that held its rod with two hands. He turned his head to Durran.

"You're probably better aim than me. Trigger that one, there," Argrave pointed to it, handing the tribal a coin. "And brace yourself. Ground might shake a little."

Durran held the coin tightly. "Just throwing away money," he muttered, taking a second. After aiming, he flicked his wrist out, tossing the coin. It rung through the air. The statue triggered, thrusting straight upwards. Its metal stick slammed loudly against the ceiling. A few rocks fell... and then after, the tunnel's ceiling caved in, including much of the wall close to it. Argrave stayed kneeling, covering his mouth from dust.

They all stayed still and tense as the dust settled. Once it had, Durran lowered his hand.

"What was that for? Fun?"

"It's a secret wall," Argrave responded, rising to his feet. The statue just across from them bent its waist, bowing, and held its hands out as though begging. Though crude, it formed a walkway across. Argrave stepped across without hesitation, heading for the great hole in the wall caused by the cave in.

In the hole created, stairs poked out from the rubble—it was a deliberate design, not a flawed installation of their golem. The subterranean people were masters of tunneling and boring, and enjoyed putting tricks like this in their tunnels. Argrave had been a bit worried this would work, but it did so flawlessly.

Argrave stepped up the stairs, mindful not to stumble over the rubble caused by the cave in. Light shone at the end of the tunnel, and he pressed towards it. He squinted as he entered the outside once again.

A verdant grove awaited them, surrounded on all sides by tall peaks. The shrubs, trees, and bushes full of berries and fruits were supported by a waterfall in the far distance that separated into two perfectly symmetrical streams. Between these streams was a large pavilion housing a marble statue.

Anneliese and the rest caught up to Argrave, looking around the place in wonder.

"This place is where..." she trailed off, awed by the beauty of the place.

"We'll recruit the best scout in the world," Argrave finished. "That's exactly right."

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Chapter 162: Spiteful Sparrows

The verdant, sheltered grove atop the mountains between the Burnt Desert and Vasquer was not an especially large place, but it was teeming with creatures thought long dead or shrouded in myth. It was like a little microcosm atop the mountains. Though the winds were harsh and the air cold outside, a pleasant, temperate atmosphere persisted here.

In 'Heroes of Berendar,' this place was a hotspot for players seeking out rarer herbs for potent alchemical potions. Its only superior was Princess Elenore's greenhouse, but getting there involved a fairly long questline.

Argrave was hit with a wave of nostalgia as they stepped towards the pavilion of jade stone. He had come here so many times, and now he was back again, physically present. The brightly colored, beautiful flowers, belying their poisonous nature... the animals cries, some of which he recognized...

And flashes of gold, flying through the air and disappearing so quickly they appeared to be an illusion. They were far too fast to track with the eyes. At a point, one of the flashes ceased just above the jade pavilion. It was a small bird no larger than a tennis ball seemingly crafted of gold, wings fluttering so fast as to be nigh invisible. The moment it moved again, it vanished like an illusion.

"I saw it!" Anneliese said excitedly, pointing a finger at where it once was. Once she processed it had already vanished, she amended, "It was just there, I swear it."

"Sounds like crazy talk to me," Argrave acted ignorant, but he couldn't fool Anneliese, who gave a small huff of amused annoyance and kept looking around.

"Fastest thing I've seen," Galamon adjusted his helmet. "Can't track it."

Durran placed his glaive upon a rock and hefted himself up a bit. "A Starsparrow... Closer kin to a hummingbird, no?"

Argrave made it to the pavilion and put his hand on one of the jade pillars holding the roof up. "Just what they called it," he said idly.

"Who's 'they?'" Durran followed up.

"The subterranean mountain tribes that conquered this place," Argrave answered at once, only to frown upon further introspection. In the past, his first thought would have been 'the game's developers.' His way of thinking was changing. It was paradoxically comforting and unsettling. He was integrating with his new life.

Shaking it off, Argrave continued, "Most people that leave behind a treasure, we're talking gemstones, gold. For the people that lived underground, they preserved the beauty of the surface, and the tools they used to conquer. In this case, the golems..." Argrave stepped away from the pavilion, eyes wandering. "And these sanctuaries. Those are the things they hold precious."

Everyone drank in the rich atmosphere of the place. Argrave could swear that even the air tasted better. Steam rose from the pools which the waterfalls fed, marking them as heated springs. It was an intoxicatingly peaceful place.

"You have any notion on how you plan to catch light?" Durran was the first to bring them back. "These birds... unless we've got steel-wired nets and hands quicker than lightning, I can't imagine we'll have much luck."

Argrave took a deep breath and nodded, steeling himself to keep going. "It could be quite simple, provided we get lucky. Otherwise, we'll be shepherding a bird into a trap for some hours." Argrave pointed to the waterfall. "There's a small cave behind that thing that shelters some pools. Some birds might be drinking from it, or there might be a nest in there. That's what we're hoping for."

Durran frowned but gave an acquiescent nod. "Considering we had to cave in the place to get here... I imagine you haven't been here before. Yet you know all of this."

“All things with time,” Argrave assured Durran, patting his shoulder. The golden-eyed tribal followed him as he walked away, lost in thought. Eventually, he shook his head and proceeded.

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As it turns out, they were not lucky.

The cave behind the waterfall was small, possessing only one entrance and amounting to no more than a thousand square feet at best. Anneliese conjured a ward at the entrance to prevent escape and investigated but could not find any Starsparrows within.

As a consequence, they began the laborious process of trying to force the bird to go into that place. Anneliese remained by the cave, standing by to ‘put the lid on the jar,’ so to speak. The three others were relegated to bird-herding duty. Galamon was adept at spotting the Starsparrows, and so Argrave followed his lead.

The vicious plants of the sanctuary proved to be cumbersome, and Argrave was forced to watch the path they took for dangerous things. Some of them had acidic liquid on their leaves that could eat through steel. Others were genuinely carnivorous. Though Argrave had a solid grasp of herbology even now, he was not perfect. Galamon’s fast reaction times was the only reason he was never genuinely hurt while leading them.

The first hour was utterly fruitless. Even ignoring the dangerous flora, some of the fauna proved to be quite aggressive. Everything in here was beautiful, true enough, but everything was equally deadly. Simple butterflies spewed poisonous mists when threatened.

The second hour proved a little better. They chased a Starsparrow for a time, but it was hardly ‘herding.’ It was more along the lines of ‘annoying it until it moved a little.’ Argrave fell into a poisonous bush chasing after it. He had panicked a great deal at first, before recalling he was Black Blooded and poison meant little to him. Forget being poisoned—he didn’t even get a rash.

The third and fourth—or was it five?—hours, their disorganized pursuit began to resemble a coordinated effort. Argrave took the role of commander, directing Galamon and Durran to go to certain locations to receive the oncoming bird. Meanwhile, he directed his Brumesingers to conjure warriors of mist at key locations, further limiting its escape options. He was glad it wouldn’t simply leave the sanctuary and go somewhere else.

Finally, just as the suns neared the point of setting, the bird finally headed towards the cave... and zig-zagged about, evoking nervousness from all of them. As if told to do so, the bird quickly darted down and disappeared into the cave. Anneliese conjured her ward and entered through it.

Argrave and Durran cheered loudly, and even Galamon seemed quite pleased. They celebrated with each other as Anneliese proceeded into the cave. Argrave tried to pick up Durran, but he hadn’t improved to the point of being able to do that, and only succeeded in embarrassing himself.

When Anneliese emerged without a golden bird in hand, their pleased expressions froze. The bird had escaped before she conjured the ward. None, not even Galamon, had seen it.

Spirit broken, Argrave called a break to watch the suns set with Anneliese. He would never break this tradition of theirs if he could help it. After, dejected beyond compare, they once again sought out the

devilish Starsparrow. The suns fell behind the mountains, but they pressed on. They needed to capture that bird to regain their honor.

When the moon reached its midpoint, they once again succeeded in herding a Starsparrow towards the cave. Durran must've got a prophecy from heaven, because he aimed magic just above the cave's overhang, striking it with lightning. The bird was frightened and sought the cave for cover, and Anneliese once again conjured her ward.

With bated breath, all watched her enter and search out the cave. They crouched a good distance away, battered and hopeful. Argrave's heart was beating fast when he saw a flash of white hair emerge out from the cave. She let down the ward...

And a little golden flash darted out from the cave, taking its place on her shoulder.

Even Galamon joined them in a primal roar of triumph at that moment.

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"Gods... I think I twisted something..." Durran complained, stroking his ankle.

"Should have learned healing magic," Argrave reprimanded, then used a C-rank spell of his own near the man's ankle.

It was the morning of the next day. Despite the strenuous yesterday, Argrave still felt ready to go. Durran and Galamon did more physical work than he did as they lacked the support of the Brumesingers. Even still, the effects of becoming Black Blooded were obvious every day. All it took was a night's rest, and though he was a bit sore, he was ready to go.

Anneliese sat in the jade pavilion, seemingly meditating. Argrave and Durran sat on the stairs leading up to the pavilion, guarding her. She was using druidic magic to control the bird directly. Meanwhile, Argrave sat with another little creature in his lap—Anneliese had surrendered her Brumesinger to him, unable to maintain more than one direct bond. With this, he now had four of the little foxes.

"Whew..." Anneliese let out a sigh as she fell back, supporting herself with her hand. A flash of gold entered Argrave's peripheries, and then a golden bird settled on her shoulder. The Starsparrow was a cute thing, a sparrow of solid gold, yet Argrave could not look at the little monstrosity kindly.

"It flies... so quickly. It feels like my heart will stop every time I move possessing it. If I wish to be somewhere within sight, I can reach it within seconds. And it can see for miles," she described wondrously, eyes still closed.

The description brought some curiosity from Argrave. In 'Heroes of Berendar,' bonding with the Starsparrow just maximized the player's perception, enabling them to see everything on the mini map far in advance. For attacking, it did decent damage, and could dodge nearly everything... but one hit would kill it, and so most players kept it protected.

Argrave was somewhat envious, but he supposed grass was always greener on the other side. Anneliese could only bond with one animal at a time, but it enabled her complete control over that animal. Conversely, Argrave's [Pack Leader] allowed him control over multiple animals, though with a lesser degree of control. It was further limited to creatures of the same species.

"It should be able to see ants on trees atop other peaks, what with all the trouble we had," Durran muttered.

Argrave's Brumesingers strode towards Anneliese, showing affection towards her. His druidic bonds always mirrored what he felt, Argrave was coming to find. The golden Starsparrow jumped atop one of them, and they played in harmony.

"Well..." Argrave grunted as he rose to his feet. "My Brumesingers are getting peckish, and they can't eat here. There are no lingering souls." He looked around the secluded grove. "We got what we needed. Now, we need to harvest some food for the Starsparrow and get out. It's a picky eater—needs to eat the seeds of magic plants. We need to get what we can while we can. Fortunately, there's plenty here."

Argrave stepped off the jade pavilion, already moving to do as he'd described. Durran looked at him, clearly exhausted, and sighed. He shook his head, dispelling tiredness, and then gave himself a slap to wake himself up.

"Hunt it for hours, now we get its food." the tribal muttered.

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With the matter of the Starsparrow settled in a relatively timely manner, they departed from the mountain sanctuary and back onto the road of golems. Though the beginning was rough for Durran and Anneliese, who were weary, soon enough they caught their stride, and the remainder of the journey through the tunnel was uneventful.

They exited from the narrow tunnels abounding with stationary golem traps back into the fast-moving mountain winds. The path continued onwards for a time, still surrounded by rusted statues, before opening up into a large central square. This square branched off into several paths.

Most importantly, one could see over the mountains, beyond into Vasquer territory. There was no clear path down, but that it could be seen was evidence enough their journey across the Burnt Desert was very nearly well and done.

Durran rushed across the square, gazing out across the land with wonder. "There it is. The lands beyond the northern mountains."

Argrave stepped up beside him. It couldn't exactly be called a land of endless green—they were in the heart of winter, and the fields had changed accordingly.

"Look. You can see some snow further north," he pointed. "I told you about it earlier, it's—"

"I know what snow is, you damned imbecile," he laughed. "You think I've never flown to a mountain's peak with a wyvern?"

Argrave tried his best not to laugh. Elsewhere, Anneliese called out, "They were spears!" as though enlightened.

Argrave turned his head, following her line of sight. Indeed, at the edge of the square, one of the golems still had its spear intact. The spearhead was strange—it resembled a knife.

“Indeed they are,” Argrave nodded, stepping up to her. “The subterranean people, they had a mythical figure they revered. He was a master thief. Allegedly, he fought a great commander from Vasquer, and during their battle, he cut off the man’s spearhead. After, he used that weapon as a knife, and led his people to conquer the mountains.”

“Then, these statues... the reason they are missing their spearhead... they mimic the warrior that thief overcame? They stand as a symbol of pride?”

“Sort of,” Argrave nodded. He retrieved the last of the coins minted in the Burnt Desert—they’d have no value in Vasquer, so he was disposing of them one by one. “Galamon, hit the one we’re looking at,” he called out, handing the vampire the coin.

Galamon took the coin, gaze jumping between Argrave, it, and the statue. Eventually, he flourished the coin between his fingers, then flicked it towards the statue. Instead of being struck down, the flying coin struck the statue squarely on the face. Steam blew out of its nose, further exaggerating the angry expression on its face.

And then, it stepped forward.

“They’re a test. A trial. Each and every one.” Argrave watched as it approached, each step jerky. The ground shook as it walked. Everyone seemed panicked, but Argrave held his hand out, casting a druidic spell. His Brumesingers emerged from his clothing, scattering across the ground.

Mist spread out from their fur, consuming the square. With another spell, Argrave focused his will on the spearhead. As the brume consumed the square, the warriors conjured by the small foxes appeared, battering at it relentlessly. They took the form of the southron elven warriors slain in the battle against Brium. They hacked just beneath the spearhead, and eventually they succeeded in cutting through the metal. The spearhead clattered to the ground.

The titanic golem halted, grinding and clicking to a stop.

Argrave walked over to the fallen spearhead and picked it up. It was a nice knife, even despite enduring the elements all these years. Even still, it couldn’t be compared to the two that Argrave came here to get.

“Fortunately, there’s a reason I went so far out of my way to get my little friends,” Argrave concluded, holding the knife up.

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Chapter 163: The Skyburnt Fortress

Argrave tossed aside the newly acquired knife. It clattered against the floor. Some of the knives could be good loot, but he had nothing to evaluate them with.

“Give warning before you do something like that,” Anneliese rebuked Argrave, placing her hand to her heart and sighing to dispel her tension. Galamon put away his sword.

Argrave shrugged without a response, watching Durran walk past the golem while giving it a wide berth. He bent over, leaning on his glaive, and retrieved the discarded knife.

“Good gods. If I’d known your little fellas could muster warriors that could cut steel, I might’ve thrown them a snack or two, won their favor.” Durran flipped the spearhead knife through his fingers, running his fingers opposite the edge to test its sharpness.

“They eat souls,” Argrave turned to him. “Might be you *have* fed them, but not deliberately.”

Durran gazed at the four small creatures scamper back to Argrave, seeking refuge in his clothes once again now that their task was done. “Got a miracle pet lined up for me?”

Argrave blanked. It was a good point, certainly, but he’d been too distracted to plan for what to assign to Durran. He mulled for a moment, then recalled, “You’ll have to get to C-rank if you want any permanence in bonds. Most of the D-rank druidic spells aren’t the type that’ll keep your druidic links lingering by your side for longer than a few hours. Anneliese has the C-rank [Bond], while I use [Pack Leader].”

“And in time, I plan on learning the B-rank spell [Progenitor], to bind us in a druidic network,” Anneliese butted in.

“That spell Tirros used back at the druidic camp in Mateth?” Argrave pointed, but then realized she probably wouldn’t know as she hadn’t been there. “Never mind, I know what it is. That... will be useful,” Argrave nodded. “At that point, you’ll be able to notice what my Brumesingers notice. Between the Starsparrow and them, ambushing us is going to be impossible. And that’s a damn great thing, because we can win most fights we’re aware are coming.”

“C-rank spells, huh?” Durran clenched his fist. “Alright. Got something to focus on. Might be I come to you two for pointers.”

Argrave walked to Anneliese and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Sure. Anneliese is the best teacher you could ask for.” He took his hand off, glancing around the square. “But we’ve idled enough. It’s time to head to Essenza, the Skyburnt Fortress.”

With those words, his gaze rested on the only road remaining that headed upwards. It went along the top of the peak, heading steadily upwards. A giant drum tower was visible in the far distance, like a capstone atop the mountains. Unlike the roads before, this was one adorned with mostly fully functioning golems, their spears still intact. Few of the subterranean people cared to test themselves on golems of that sort...

And barring two, Argrave didn’t plan on it, either.

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Galamon raised his hands to his ears, startled by the deafeningly loud thunder booming out across the peaks. Everyone else was a step slower in reacting, but they all turned to the sky where stormy clouds whirled far above.

“Lightning on mountaintops? Forget this,” Durran shouted out. “We should call it a day, wait for conditions to improve. I like living.”

“They won’t improve,” said Argrave loudly. “This place is always misery weather-wise.”

The Skyburnt Fortress, Essenza, was the only piece of architecture atop these peaks built wholly by the subterranean mountain people. It was octagonal in shape, built around a cone mountain peak. Eight towers marked eight corners, each with a jade pavilion atop them similar to the one they'd seen within the wildlife sanctuary. The cone peak had a great drum tower built atop it, and the peak's innards had been bored out to make stairs leading up to the tower.

As they continued to watch the stormy skies, lightning struck again. The lightning arched towards the top of the jade pavilions, where spikes of metal rose up into the sky. The metal spike and jade pavilion both sparked, glowing brilliantly even amidst the shade of the clouds. Despite the size of the apparent storm, no rain fell. Even the winds had ceased.

"You really want to go in there?" Durran asked incredulously. "Even the youngest in the tribes know not to fly a wyvern in a storm. This is no good!"

"This place isn't natural. We'll be fine. Just don't step on the jade," Argrave warned, stepping forward. "If you don't step on the jade, you'll be fine. If you do step on it, you might die."

Argrave took the first step forward, and his two elven companions followed without second-guessing him. Durran hung back, turning in the road as though deliberating between waiting outside and following. Eventually, he let out a low laugh, and rushed to catch up with Argrave.

They passed beneath the great gateways of Essenza, where two golems three times the size as those on the road stood guard. Their spearheads were fashioned of greatswords. Frankly, those two gate golems were nightmarish when compared to the weapon they dropped, and Argrave was quite glad that he didn't need to fight them.

The interior of Essenza was a barren place, but it seemed busy. That was lending to the pattern running across the floor. The place was a maze of simple, gray stone and beautifully polished jade. Whenever the clap of thunder deafened them, the jade on the floor would spark and glow, gleaming dangerously.

"The Ice of Balein..." Galamon muttered.

"What?" Argrave turned back.

Galamon said nothing, watching the jade writhe with sparks at random intervals. Then, he knelt down, staring a bit closer. "The Ice of Balein is said to conduct electricity in this manner. I thought it only myth, but the appearance, its characteristics..."

Argrave raised a brow, thinking on the matter. If he prowled his memory, the term was vaguely familiar. "You'll have to tell me more of it later," Argrave concluded, and Anneliese nodded in agreement.

Galamon grunted, rising to his feet.

"Give me some space," Argrave held a hand out. "I'll lead—I know the way. We have to walk across this. If we're closely bunched, someone might bump into someone, cause an unfortunate accident. Whether it be the walls, the floor, the ceiling—be very mindful of what you touch. Avoid this Ice of Balein. Follow my lead."

Despite Argrave's confident command, he took a deep breath to fight his uncertainty. Everyone gave him ample space, watching him closely. He set his foot down on the first bit of stone, very mindful of how near he was to the jade.

Like this, Argrave stepped forward ever so slowly. He took a safe, if streamlined, route, heading around the central drum tower in the center towards where he knew the stairs would be. He was ever mindful of how large his feet were in this moment, and more than a bit resentful of this fact. He remained cautious with his steps and deliberated long before he touched anything for balance.

Whenever the lightning sparked, it was difficult to avoid being distracted by the brightness and the sound of it. Between focusing on the path and avoiding being distracted by the myriad distractions, it was very fitting to call this place a 'test.' He could not afford any focus to the people behind him.

Eventually, he looked up and saw an opening in the drum tower. He let out a light sigh of relief. Like this, he took measured steps towards it, refusing to allow his caution to drop even slightly. With his enchantments, he wasn't sure if the lightning would kill him outright. It definitely didn't stand to be pleasant, though, and Argrave made sure not to test that theory.

When Argrave passed the opening, things became easier. A stairway lay ahead. These stairs simply alternated—in every two steps one was made of jade, the other of stone. Considering Argrave took stairs two steps at a time normally, it didn't prove to offer much challenge at all. Argrave got into a stable position, and then waited for his companions to get closer.

"Anyone had any shocking revelations?" Argrave called out once everyone had caught up amply.

"Listen, leader man—now is not the time," Durran called out with a tight voice.

Argrave was too tense to laugh at that, and he turned to the stairs once he was content everyone was well. Despite the ease it offered, he moved very cautiously. The stairs were smaller than his feet, as it turned out, and so he needed to awkwardly maneuver with his feet held sideways to avoid touching the jade portions. That, coupled with the fact that he couldn't use the walls for balance easily, made it much more difficult than he had thought.

After probably the most tiring set of stairs Argrave had ever endured, he saw the storm hovering above. He didn't dare drop his caution at that point, very carefully making his way up to the top of the central drum tower.

The top of the drum tower was flat, marked by a large jade spiral starting from the center and moving outwards. Each branch of the spiral was thin, and easy to step over. The parapets were tall enough that even Argrave could not see over the higher portions.

At the opposite end of where they had come from, two golems stood. They were a fair bit larger than most of the ones that had decorated the walkway. They were more complete, somehow—their figures were more intricate, and they bore genuine armor. It seemed to be plate mail. Their spears, too, were different, most notably in the spearhead. The knife spearheads were blue, green crystals on their length shining brightly.

Durran emerged, carefully jumping past the last jade stairway onto the bit of stone that was safe. He held his arms out and smiled in triumph, eyes darting around. He spotted the golems, and his face fell.

"Gods be damned. You bloody bastard," he looked at Argrave incredulously.

"Yep," Argrave nodded.

Durran pointed his glaive. "*These* are the ones we're to fight, and on this hellscape that sparks every couple seconds?"

Argrave shook his head. "No, I came up here to get a nice view for our picnic."

"Alright. Stupid question," Durran conceded. "Well, I guess I get to sit back while you get your little creatures to slave away."

"Au contraire," Argrave waved his finger. "The knives these guys have are a little too strong to be chopped very quickly. And they're a little faster than their jerkier relatives." Argrave took a deep breath. "The master thief I mentioned—in their folklore, he was attuned with lightning. Allegedly, those spears hold the daggers he used." Argrave held his arms out. "Stands to reason that the test to get them won't be easy, no?"

His gaze passed between Galamon and Durran. Galamon caught on quickly, and after a while, Durran's face grew somber as he realized what was to be asked of him.

"We ought to plan," Argrave clasped his hands together. "Lucky for all of us, I know how these guys fight."

#####

As much as Argrave wished he could simply fight these golems from a safe place, no such safe place existed. Against these foes, maneuverability was a valuable thing. The area was wide, and though it had one prevailing hazard, the spirals were thin and easily sidestepped as long as one remained cautious.

Galamon stood at the forefront. Durran was near him, if slightly behind. Anneliese and Argrave stood at the back. Argrave had his Brumesingers prepared for combat, while Anneliese had moved her Starsparrow a safe distance away. It couldn't be called a formation—there weren't enough people. But it was definitely deliberate, and all prepared for the fight with the two golems across.

The first to make their move, as agreed, was Galamon. He got his bow and arrow ready, taking aim. Without hesitating much, it twanged out, the loosed projectile soaring through the air ordinarily. It struck the golem on their right.

At once, the whole air seemed to shift. The still black clouds above them writhed, and all electric activity within ceased. As if reaching down, the center of the cloud descended downwards a single point, heading for the golems. The storm cloud seemed to enter into their nose, their ears, their eyes. Durran clenched his glaive a bit tighter.

After a time, the electricity within the clouds sparked loudly, then rained upon the right-side golem's spear in such large quantity as to produce a boom louder than any that had come before. Everyone flinched from the intensity of the sound even though they had all expected it.

Both of the golems stepped forward, black storm clouds billowing from their joints and their eyes. Their eyes sparked with electricity, visible even through the black mist surging from within. Their exaggeratedly angry expressions seemed genuinely terrifying in that moment.

Durran laughed maniacally. “Gods above. My heart’s skipping beats.”

The golem on the right side hefted its spear. It seemed to be holding a solid mass of electricity.

“I’ve gotta concur,” Argrave shouted back.

The golem slammed the spear down, and electricity consumed the spirals, sending pillars of lightning up into the sky in the shape of a vortex. When things settled, the lightning had passed to the golem on the left side.

[Jackal Among Snakes](#)

Chapter 164: Giantkillers

Galamon had taught Argrave a lot about combat, commanding, and strategy. The man was a great general, and Argrave was eager to learn whatever he could from him. Barring his own personal interest on the matter, as things proceeded, he would be talking to and commanding a lot more than a group of four and their pets. He needed to learn these things.

He told Argrave of a simple principle—when fighting multiple foes, focus on ending one foe quickly so as to upset the balance in one’s favor. That strategy held up with his knowledge of video games in general. When fighting multiple bosses, or even just regular enemies, it’s best to focus on one and knock it out quickly. After deliberating on the matter, Argrave recalled a phrase that was used to describe that, even if indirectly.

Divide and conquer.

It wasn’t a one-to-one match in terms of definition, but the point stood—enemies united are much more difficult to deal with.

“Galamon!” Argrave shouted as the golems approached them. He triggered the Blessing of Supersession for caution’s sake, though he was not sure he would need it. He could not bombard these foes with electric eels.

The golem on the left side bore lightning on its spear. Its actions were smooth, fluid, and it proceeded towards them in an almost human run. In stark contrast, the golem on the right side without lightning was more withdrawn, and it did not move half as fast as its companion. Soon enough, it trailed behind its lightning-clad ally.

Galamon received Argrave’s command and rushed forward to meet the lightning-wreathed golem. Though the elven vampire was huge, the golem was titanic—Argrave estimated it was near twelve feet tall, and with the black storm clouds billowing from its body, it appeared larger. Nevertheless, Galamon approached it without fear.

Argrave cast a subset spell of [Pack Leader], commanding his Brumesingers to attack what he willed. Simultaneously, he shouted, “Durran!”

“I know!” the tribal returned as he moved along the edge of the circular tower, heading towards the rightward golem.

Galamon met with the lightning-wreathed golem, his greatsword at the ready. He kept a safe distance away, not moving to attack at all. The golem raised its spear in one hand, then thrust. The attack was

inhumanly fast, yet Galamon returned with an equally ridiculously fast sidestep. The spear impaled the ground, sending a single surge through the jade spiral. None were on the jade, though. It dragged its spear through the stone, sending rubble and sparks flying everywhere, and did a great underhand swing at Galamon, who again dodged narrowly.

On the opposite side, Durran engaged with the other golem. Though slower, it was still ridiculously potent. Because of its slowness, though, Durran led it away, battering its spearhead with relentless casts of the D-rank spell [Wind Blade]. It rarely had an opportunity to swing. Argrave and Anneliese followed this fight. Argrave's four Brumesingers relentlessly battered its spearhead with conjured warriors, the foxes howling their song while writhed in the brume. Anneliese contributed where she could, but without getting dangerously close it was difficult to be accurate.

Argrave's gaze constantly wandered to the golem battling Galamon. It was a ridiculous show of prowess from both sides—the golem had a machine ruthlessness, destroying parts of the tower parapet with ferocious swings as Galamon dodged with finesse entirely unbecoming the plate armor he wore. The armor served its purpose, though, shielding him from stones whistling through the air after each staggeringly powerful attack.

Argrave wasn't watching because of worry. He was waiting for a sign.

The moment he saw the lightning-clad golem put two hands on its spear, he shouted as loud as he could, "SWITCH!"

Durran pushed the back of his glaive against the tower's parapet, narrowly dodging a swing from the golem. He slid beneath its legs and then took off in a desperate sprint towards the opposite side. The golem fighting Galamon raised its spear up and slammed the ground. Just as they had before, pillars of electricity roared up into the sky from the spiral of jade on the floor loud enough to make Argrave's ears hurt.

When things settled, the golem that had been combatting Durran now bore lightning, and Galamon disengaged to go meet it. He and Durran passed by each other, and Durran took the attention of the other golem now bereft of lightning.

Argrave didn't know if Durran had fled too well, or if Galamon had disengaged too slowly. Regardless, the twelve-foot-tall monstrosity of angry metal turned towards Argrave and Anneliese. Its first ground-shaking step made it clear that they didn't have enough time to get away. They both stepped backwards, terrified.

His mind worked quickly. *Anneliese is to my right. Galamon is to my left. He's the only one that can deal with this golem effectively. She's furthest from Galamon.*

With rationality and emotions both cementing his decision, Argrave ceased retreating. He stepped forward and pushed Anneliese further back in one motion. He tried to head towards Galamon, kiting the golem, but the thing was so fast it mattered little.

Its first attack towards Argrave was a wide righthand swing. It was deceptively fast, and the lightning distorted his view, but Argrave crouched and lurched backwards. He could feel heat move near his face as the spearhead passed by. In seconds, the towering thing grew closer. It pulled its hand back, preparing a thrust. Argrave used his enchanted ring to conjure a B-rank ward.

The golem thrust with the speed of a snake's bite, and the attack met the golden ward. The shield didn't last more than a second before shattering. Fortunately, Argrave didn't need more than a second. He dodged, and the attack sunk deep into the stone just beside his foot. He saw Galamon very close, and felt some triumph extinguish his panic.

Argrave tried to move, but it felt like he was kicking air. His eyes darted to the ground to see the stone bricks beneath him crumbling.

It must've hit a weak part of the floor, Argrave realized. He started to see the half-jade, half-stone stairs below as the floor beneath him fell away. Argrave sought out something, anything, to find purchase, but the entire floor was collapsing. Galamon was close, but too far to beat gravity.

There was something solid, though. Argrave grabbed the golem's arm, glaring up at its eyes billowing smoke, sparking with electricity. He felt it move, pulling him back. Argrave yanked himself forward, away from the crumbling floor and the spearhead, and then...

Argrave saw white and felt tremendous pain. For a few seconds, he didn't know where he was. Slowly, whiteness faded, and his sight returned. He realized he was on his back, staring up at the sky. He couldn't breathe at all. He grabbed at his chest. It felt like someone had dropped a 300-pound barbell right on his ribs. He'd probably been struck by the shaft of the golem's spear. If not for his enchanted gear, he was certain he'd be dead.

As though brought back to life, Argrave sat up, taking in small, pained breaths as his windedness faded. He tried to stand but failed. He was spasming slightly—likely the electricity from the golem's blow. When his vision fully returned, he saw the lightning-wreathed golem striding towards him, spear held at the ready. That was motivation enough to stand, pained though he was.

A black axe struck the approaching golem in the head. While barely reacting to the blow itself, it did turn from Argrave. Galamon had thrown his axe and stood holding his greatsword in one hand. Argrave watched the axe fall over the edge of the tower, lost.

Anneliese rushed over at that point, practically tackling Argrave away. She helped him to safety, and once she was content he was there, moved to rejoin the fight. She said something, but Argrave couldn't hear over the ringing in his ears. He took a few seconds to gather himself, regain his bearings, and then stood straight once again.

This time, Argrave focused on the golem Galamon engaged, aiming for it because they had already damaged the spearhead heavily. Durran held off the other admirably, luring it far away on his own. With the speed of the lightning-clad golem attacks it was difficult to land blows, yet Argrave's Brumesingers still chipped away at it.

The golem put two hands on its spear, and Argrave at once shouted, "SWITCH!" again. The shout must've dislodged something, because he felt a little blood in his mouth.

As the golem prepared to slam its spear on the ground, Anneliese launched herself in the air slightly with a spell of wind. She held her hand out and used the C-rank [Ice Spear]. The spear of ice met the descending slam in transit. A crack echoed through the air, and though the lightning slammed into the ground, something metal soared through the air, clattering against the ground.

The golem halted, and all of the storm cloud within it dispersed, surging towards the other golem. Argrave spotted the severed spearhead, and feeling some triumph, faced the other foe. Though clad in lightning and monstrously fast, only one remained.

Durran fled from the now-empowered golem. His flight was not as fast as the first time, though, and the golem gained on him. It swung just as he neared the now-immobile other golem, and he sought refuge behind it. The lightning-wreathed spear slammed into the other golem's chest, knocking it a solid ten feet away. Durran narrowly avoided being swept up, putting yet more distance between himself and the golem.

Galamon confronted the last foe. Though the attacks were every bit as ferocious as before, it seemed different, somehow, as though Galamon had figured something out. His dodges were closer but more certain, and he avoided even the rubble dislodged by the golem's wild attacks.

The next minute was a masterful dance. Galamon continued to avoid the golem's flurry, not an inch away from the spearhead with every attack. Whenever the golem paused, Anneliese, Argrave, and Durran all attacked it. The golem pressed forward, ostensibly on the offensive, yet it felt like they were beating it into submission.

When it raised its spear far above its head, preparing for an earth-shattering overhand blow, Galamon stopped moving. As soon as it began to swing, he swung. Argrave feared the elven vampire had lost his marbles, but the enchanted blade projected out its blade of wind. When the two attacks met, the spearhead broke off, retaining most of its momentum. It stabbed the jade spiral just behind Galamon.

The titanic golem fell to its knees, black storm cloud pouring out of its mouth. The cloud rose into the sky steadily, like smoke from a failing engine. Then, both of the immobile golems writhed. Lightning shot up into the sky from their mouths. All four of them watched the sky warily. A second later, lightning descended again. Two bolts of lightning struck each knife in turn.

Argrave stood, breathing in the silence. A loud clattering drew his attention. Durran had fallen to his back, and his glaive lay beside him. Argrave worriedly approached, pushing past the pain in his chest. He kneeled beside the man.

"What's wrong?" Argrave insisted. "Are you hit somewhere? Where?"

Durran started wheezing. Argrave hesitated for a moment, scanning the man for injuries. Considering he was wheezing, perhaps he'd been struck in the chest.

It took him a second to realize that his wheezing was laughter.

"What's wrong," Durran repeated, then resumed his wheezing laughter. "What in the gods' name do you think is wrong? Almost pissed myself, not ashamed to admit it."

Argrave laughed in relief, then looked around. Anneliese stood above one of the fallen spearheads.

"It is over," she sighed, getting her breathing back under control. She covered her mouth with shaky hands and breathed slowly. Argrave rose to his feet and went to stand next to her, comforting as best he knew how.

“Are they safe to pick up?” Galamon questioned. Argrave turned his head where the vampire was kneeling over the spearhead that had fallen near him.

Argrave knelt to the one by Anneliese’s feet and picked it up. “Wouldn’t be much point in coming here if they weren’t safe.”

The dagger was a beautiful thing, completely unworn despite the ferocity of the fight they’d just endured. It had no guard, but its handle was black. Its blade was a resplendent blue metal of some kind and bore barbs near the tip. It had three gems in the center of the blade—a large emerald at its base, a smaller one further up, and the smallest just above that. A circle of small rubies encircled each gem. Magic shone in the gemstones.

“These...” Argrave held it up. “...are the Daggers of Ayazz. But I prefer to call them the Giantkillers.”

Jackal Among Snakes

Chapter 165: Lion's Lap

Anneliese and Argrave stood shoulder to shoulder, their arms stretched out ahead. His arms were just a bit longer than hers. Spell matrixes swirled to life in their hands, and then, they proceeded to blast Galamon with the C-rank [Skysunder] again and again and again.

The corridor they were in filled up with sound and white light both as they rained lightning upon the elven vampire. Durran stood at their backs, shielding his eyes. The sound echoed out of the small tunnel dug into mountainside supporting the Skyburnt Fortress, and into the skies beyond that.

Argrave lowered his hands first, magic entirely spent. A few seconds after, Anneliese ceased as well. Ahead, Galamon stood, both of the Daggers of Ayazz in hand. White sparks danced around both blades, their power so intense they illuminated the entire corridor.

The elven vampire took a deep breath and exhaled. The inside of his mouth was glowing the same shade of white emanating from the daggers. He turned on his heels, then stepped away further down the corridor. The light provided by the dancing electricity lit up a great wall before them, with two gemstone-encircled slots along the center, rather like a plug.

Galamon thrust both daggers into the wall’s slots, one after the other. A great *click* echoed out through the corridor once the second was inserted. The lightning writhed in the slots wildly, but then, as if finally accepted, it began to dance up the walls. The white electricity morphed into different shades as it travelled along.

The sparks filled up the wall in a fashion resembling a meter slowly filling up to completion. Argrave thought it was similar to those strongman competitions where one would slam a hammer upon a button and watch and see how far the light rose up. Everyone watched in awe, and Galamon released the daggers and stepped back.

An image of dancing sparks took form. It depicted an eclipse. A man stood beneath it, thrusting a sword straight through the sun and the moon.

“Wondrous thing...” Anneliese said quietly.

“Now, imagine we charge up his daggers like that, and then he stabs some big monster. Absolutely devastating. Could kill a dragon. That’s why I call them the Giantkillers.” Argrave pointed his fingers, the least impressed of the group by the lightshow on the wall. Anneliese and Galamon didn’t seem to appreciate this commentary, but Durran looked intrigued as he raised his eyebrows at Argrave.

As they watched, the wall started to depress. Some mechanism came to life, and it clicked horrendously. The grinding it made was like a screech that triggered some primal discomfort, and everyone tried to cover their ears despite the fact two of them wore helmets and could not necessarily cover their ears. Anneliese’s Starsparrow chirped to express its displeasure.

The image faded, and the wall moved about. It shifted from place to place in simple, elaborate blocks, moved by hinges and pistons of some sort. When things were done, the sleek stone corridor extended forward into darkness.

Argrave was the first to step forward. He pulled out the relocated daggers, and then handed them back to Galamon a bit irritated. “Don’t lose these. Took a mighty wallop in the chest for these, let’s not forget that.”

“And I lost my axe over a mountainside saving your life,” Galamon rebutted, taking the daggers.

“I’ll... get you another,” he reassured weakly.

Galamon walked away. Hiding a grimace, Argrave looked to Durran.

“Have your doubts been quelled, mostly?”

Durran focused his gaze on Argrave. “I never really doubted you. I was just trying to annoy you. You’ve already disclosed some spooky details that makes my skin crawl, and that was more than enough for me to realize your knowledge is real way back then.”

Argrave was a bit stunned, but after a while he smiled and gave a resigned shake of his head, turning to the passage before them. “This... is the Passage of the Last Conquest.” Argrave took a few steps deeper into the dark corridor. “Their leader, Ayazz, whose daggers we now wield... he had intended to conquer the Lionsun Castle. He died prematurely. Lacking a leader, the subterranean mountain tribes sealed this secret tunnel and made those daggers the key, so that one day his equal could once again lead the tribes to conquer the vast lands of Vasquer...” Argrave conjured spell light, his magic having already replenished enough from blasting Galamon to do so. “Or so goes the legends.”

Anneliese looked at the daggers in a new light now that Argrave had given their lore.

“It’s a very long walk, so we had best get to it,” Argrave adjusted his backpack. “Once we get into the castle, we just focus on getting out quickly. I know a good route.”

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“You know, even in the mountains completely opposite the Lionsun Castle... people talk about House Parbon,” Durran mused, his glaive meeting the stone and clicking out through the stone corridor with every other step he took. “The patriarch of the house is always a fierce, undefeated warrior, but he’s honorable. It’s been like that for centuries, unchanging. One of them spared the leader of a great confederation—in return, they gave him a wyvern.”

“Yeah,” Argrave nodded. “Heard that one before. It’s true. He does have a wyvern. Considering this tunnel leads right into where it’s kept, it stands to reason you’ll see it.”

“Mmm,” Durran turned his head, intrigued. “Pass right by it, eh? Does the leader man have something interesting planned?”

Argrave smiled. This was why he liked Durran—the man was crazy enough to consider something like that. In ‘Heroes of Berendar,’ he definitely would have stolen the wyvern. It was a nice capstone for this route, especially if the player intended to side with Vasquer. But now, troubling things called ‘morals’ existed...

“No,” Argrave shook his head. “Even though it might not be the best, my relationship with House Parbon has improved somewhat. I don’t want a reputation as a wyvern-thief. And *everyone* will see us fly away. I don’t care to attract that kind of attention.”

“Not stealing. It’s borrowing. After the flight, I’m positive it’ll return to its home. Wyverns always do. Well, that’s fine,” Durran shook his head. “I’m much more interested in the current patriarch of House Parbon.”

“Ideally, we won’t see him, even from a distance. In, out—quick and easy,” Argrave used his hands to emphasize the speed.

“Hmm...” Durran stared at Argrave. “Time was, I thought I was on the taller side, but you people... the prospect sneaking with you divests me of all confidence. Especially with one of you wearing plate armor,” he pointed to Galamon walking ahead.

“You’ll come to learn Galamon is one of the most reliable people you could ever wish for,” Argrave shifted his pack.

Anneliese nodded quietly in agreement, and Durran shrugged, saying nothing more. They continued their long walk down the corridor.

#####

As they neared the end of the hallway, what was a sleek and square place narrowed into a tight tunnel that forced the three tall people of the group to crouch low, which elicited some laughter from Durran before even he, too, was forced to duck low and proceed.

The stone turned into a rough place of dirt, hardened by moisture. The only solace was the lack of insects. They pressed onwards in silence, remaining sure of step despite the signs of the tunnel ending.

When they finally came to a solid wall of dirt, Durran noted, “I thought you knew everything, leader man.”

“Never said that...” Argrave felt along the wall. He ran his fingers against it, brushing aside moist dirt as he searched for something. He bit his lips when his fingers brushed against nothing but dirt. Frustrated, he started to dig. He was growing a bit worried they’d need to excavate personally when his fingers met a bit of string. His face brightened at once.

He pulled the string out as far as he could and wrapped it around his hands. He leaned back, using all of his body weight and some leg strength to pull on the thing. He hissed as it dug into his hands, pressing onwards.

Galamon noticed Argrave's struggle. He reached down and grabbed the string, giving it a pull. Argrave felt like a child who'd been struggling to do something, only to have his parent do it effortlessly, completely invalidating his efforts.

Galamon continued to pull the string. It was wound into the walls, and once it was pulled free, things fell away effortlessly. The dirt blocking the path ahead crumbled, revealing a set of slots in the wall near identical to the ones they'd first passed through back at the wall.

"I was pulling it just fine..." Argrave muttered.

"Do you need to charge these once again?" Galamon questioned, retrieving the daggers from his backpack and holding them up.

"No, just put them in," Argrave said bitterly, still wishing he'd been able to pull the string. Anneliese gave him some shoulder pats to comfort him, but Argrave only felt more childlike after that.

Galamon shoved the daggers into the slots. At once, the still walls around them began to shift. A pair of arms pushed forward around them, causing Durran to freak out a little. The arms pushed through the dirt, frighteningly quiet, and jammed it aside very easily, compacting it enough to clear a great deal of room.

Eventually the twin arms met something more solid. The fingers of the arm pressed forth, though, cutting into the stone easily. Once they dug in deep enough, they rotated, cutting out a square swath of it. Without any warning, the arms ceased.

Argrave stepped forward and pushed on the square bit of stone. It fell forward, cracking loudly as it hit the floor, and sunlight fell upon their party. Argrave squinted, waiting for his eyes to adjust as he moved beyond. When his vision finally settled, he took note of his surroundings.

They were on a great plateau of gray stone. This plateau was surrounded by a wall of the same stone no more than ten feet tall, giving one the impression of an arena. Much of the surfaces was marred with claw marks, and animal bones lay about everywhere, the majority of them broken or partially eaten. And in the center of this plateau, there was a great mound of red scales, curled into a ball.

"Gods above..." Durran stepped out. "What a beautiful creature that is."

Galamon stepped up to Argrave and grabbed his shoulder. Argrave looked up at him. The elven vampire watched ahead, wrapped up in caution.

Argrave assumed it was because of the wyvern. The great creature uncurled, perhaps disturbed by the sound of the wall falling. Argrave was not especially worried. It was a calm creature, he knew, and if all else failed, druidic magic could at least ensure their safe passage.

Just then, he spotted another figure walk out from behind the wyvern, moving to grab its horns. It was a tall man with long, crimson hair, wearing resplendent white plate mail and decorated with a long red cloak.

Margrave Reinhardt stared at them, one hand on his wyvern's horns, the other on the sword at his belt. Everyone stood, a bit flabbergasted. It felt like a tumbleweed might fly by at any moment.

Argrave raised his hand up and waved. "Hi," he yelled out.