

Someone shook Viv awake, and she wondered if it deserved the death penalty.

“Mdrglg.”

“Sorry, Bob. Necromancers is here.”

“Fuck!”

It was dawn. She was in a cleared area of the wall, and wrapped in several layers of blankets. Arthur was currently hanging from Cernit’s arm guard, teeth dig deep into its surface. The lieutenant calmly stood up and the small dragon fell back down with an annoyed squeak upon her chest where she had been resting.

She entangled herself and jumped to her feet. The pale light shone on a field of death the likes of which she had never seen. From the walls to the ramp, a solid mass of carbonized corpses formed a hellish slope garnered with bony protrusion. The soldiers lined the wall in loose order. They had had casualties. She turned and saw five forms lying horizontal in the courtyard, the remains covered with tarps.

She turned her attention outward and searched for the necromancer. Two gut spillers and two puppeteers creating a protective wall of revenants were making their way up the road at a leisurely pace. She could vaguely see the outline of a pair of feet behind the imposing mass of undead.

“Bet you’re regretting not having a bow,” she complained in a low voice.

“We will be sure to ask for one with the next resupply,” came Benetti’s mocking voice. The banter made a few men smile. The rest remained tense.

Their foe stopped at the bottom of the ramp, a good thirty meters away from the edge of the wall and far from her optimal range. She saw a brief flash of white from behind the gut spillers and they parted, finally revealing her foe.

[Adept necromancer, noble, deposed ruler, extremely dangerous]

She expected a bald man with destroyed teeth, the male equivalent of the Disney evil witch. She saw a handsome man with kind dark eyes and a lopsided grin, made irregular by the burn scar straining his left cheek. She could not see much else from that distance.

“Hello? Ah, it works,” a smooth voice came, as if through a loudspeaker.

Another language. This one she could understand rather easily. It was like old imperial with only minor variations. It was possibly to follow if she focused and he spoke slowly, which he did. A bit like heavily accented québécois if one spoke French. Or Scottish if one spoke English.

“You never know with colorless magic. But I digress. You will forgive me for not revealing my name. I cannot take any risk before I complete my task.”

He kept silent for a few moments after that. Cernit did not reply. The kind officer bristled with outrage and barely contained disgust.

“How you must hate me for what I have become. I wish things had been different. Every evil I have committed for an ultimate good has only led to another evil. Now I must see it to the end or it will have been all in vain. I can live with anything but that.”

Another pause.

“If it is any comfort, you are the last fort I shall destroy. I cannot have you warn them of my movement, you see? If they expect me, I might fail. But I digress yet again. It’s this Jarna-cursed poisoning.”

His voice was powerful and rhythmical, carried to her by magic as if he stood at a polite distance instead of down the wall. It drew her in. It also drew the others as they stood there with rapt attention, eager to know what he would say next.

“I did not come here to say that I was sorry although I am. I came here to ask which one of you killed my son.”

The raw pain in the man’s voice stole her breath. It must have provoked a reaction in her allies too, because the Necromancer’s gaze pierced her with laser-like intensity. All warmth left her chest.

“So it was you. The mysterious witch. No need to deny it, I was a noble before I was a necromancer. Discerning the truth is a necessary skill for us. The paths we follow never withdraw their gifts, even when we stray.”

The necromancer took one shaky breath. He would look almost vulnerable were it not for the horrors by his side.

“I know we deserve death. I just hoped that I would die before him. No parent should outlive their child, you see.”

She linked the man’s angular face to that of the teenager she had killed.

Aaah shit.

“I cannot really blame you. Just know that I hate you nonetheless. I am too far gone to deny myself one last hypocrisy.”

He looked away then, and when he next spoke, there was steel in his voice.

“Whoever kills her can go free. I swear it on my soul.”

“Merde.”

Viv looked around but nobody moved. Cernit soon made a vibrant oath, quivering with rage. He was the only one to meet her eyes. He gave her a nod and she knew at this moment that he would rather die a hundred times than betray her. Jor and Benetti soon joined him with the later one speaking in Old Imperial.

“He who would betray king, country, and life itself, will have to contend with us. We will make it our priority to slay him.”

The necromancer turned back with one last, bitter chuckle.

The soldiers remained silent, eyes front. The medic who had helped her with Jor stole a glance in her direction for a quick smile. The cook nodded at her too. Most of the surviving soldiers seemed unimpressed by the necromancer’s promise.

The strange man had regained the ranks of the abominations he now led. She wondered what had pushed him to do so, to fall so low as to use monsters against humans for some obscure goal. It seemed taboo in a world where creatures were mankind’s greatest threat. It probably was.

She shook her head. It did not matter why. It mattered that he did, and that it was far too late for him to redeem himself. She would have to kill him.

“I want to check on Solfis,” she told Benetti. Cernit nodded, but frowned afterward.

“Never alone. Benetti, protect.”

“Yes, lieutenant. Benetti, protect,” the disgraced gentleman repeated in a slightly condescending voice. Cernit rolled his eyes but let it go and she was soon heading down the stairs with

dragonette in tow. Benetti's expression fell to sadness when they passed by the deceased. She looked at him.

"They do not deserve this. They do not deserve to be here. Only I do."

"Benetti?" she asked, suddenly worried. He gave her a disarming smile. It felt strange to see his foreign traits and greenish skin so full of emotion. His humanity transcended the differences between them. Viv did not like that at all. She did not want to feel too much of anything right now.

"I here because I did bad things to women. With stupid friends. Only, last woman was someone important. She threw her pain at my head during the trial and my eyes were opened. I deserve to be punished. I deserve to be here. Others do not. We save them together, yes?"

"Yes, Benetti. We save them together."

"Then, maybe, I am Ir Leias Benetti again. Worthy of my name."

She was not sure what to think of that. It seemed important to him, that name, and her opinion as well. She decided to say something because he was clearly expecting it and leaving him hanging would be awkward. Thoughtful words cost her nothing.

"You already act like Ir Leias Benetti."

Some weight was lifted from his tired face.

"Yes, I act like that. First act, then be. Yes?"

That she could wholeheartedly agree. The shared moment made her smile.

"First act then be."

They arrived at the tower, its doors left open.

Arthur squeaked and categorically refused to step close. She tried to bribe the small creature with food. Nothing worked.

"Squee!"

"It wants fight," Benetti observed.

Or she did not want to die cooped up in a death trap. In any case, Viv decided to let it go. The little monster was smart, perhaps smart enough to make her own decision. She could not spare the strength.

Solfis was inside, working on its head. The gut spiller's two horns were now fully engraved.

"How is it going?" she asked.

//The frame is almost ready.

//I only need another hour.

//I had to expedite a few systems that will not interfere with normal operation.

//I can still tweak them later.

//How are things outside? Your condition was briefly concerning.

"Not too bad. I think I killed all his crawlers but two. He still has his heavier creatures, but they need to force the gate open to go through. Only his puppeteers remain a major threat."

//Good.

//Remember, once I am ready, I will be able to dispose of the enemy caster with great alacrity.

//Then his horde will disperse.

//There is not enough vitality inside of the fort to attract more than a few creatures at the time.

//Take no risks.

"I won't. Take any stupid risks, I mean."

Her worry calmed, she closed the door behind her and walked out. Benetti was studiously avoiding looking at Arthur, who was planted three meters away from him in a pouncing position.

"Arthur, no bullying the knights please."

"Squee!"

"It seems... very protective of you," Benetti observed.

"Yes, she can be a handful. Come on, let's go to the walls."

Benetti exchanged one last glare with the ferocious overgrown lizard and followed after. They climbed swiftly and found everyone's attention focused south.

A few days before, God that felt like a fucking eternity ago, they had cleaned a village to the north. And now, the southern one was coming to greet them. Another wave of undead flesh was making its merry way to them. It centered around its own core of special undead.

"What the fuck. Is that normal?"

"There has not been a group of necromancers working in concert for decades..." Benetti mumbled by her side.

For one precious moment, she hoped that the two would collide and fight. Of course, they merged peacefully.

“Double fuck.”

Without pause, the elites formed a battle line and walked forth, revenants screening them under the control of puppeteers. Larger revenants climbed on the back and shoulders of gut spillers and other weird animals, including disturbing insectoid things. They had abandoned all attempt at tactics that she could see. They were just going to brute force it.

And it would work.

Cernit barked an order and the soldiers on the side moved away from the edge of the wall until they formed a half circle. There were only ten of them. They would not hold shit. Not for long.

“Do what you can. We hold here. Keep path open,” Cernit told her.

“He means the stairs. We keep the stairs clear then make a run for the tower.”

“Tower, yes. I hope Solfis good.”

She sure as hell hoped so, too.

The mass made good time until they arrived at the base of the flesh slope. The first revenants quickly collapsed as ash and brittle bones gave under their collective weight. The charge turned into an upward slog. The flesh ramp had turned into an obstacle.

Viv raised a hand. She took a deep breath.

Yoink was an absolutely bullshit powerful spell that was so cheated it would kill anyone but herself. It would not suffice here. She had to go beyond bullshit cheating. She had to go for full rule-mangling retardation.

She called to her mind the twisted spiral of the ‘pierce rune, the base of the yoink spell. This time, she added the ‘overcome’ rune. Two colliding flat planes appeared before her. The rune looked like someone had punched through a flimsy wall.

She lurched, but did not give in. Her improved ability to cast and multitask showed its worth now, allowing her to visualize the two at the same time. Her vision still turned blurry from the effort. She overcharged the beam and unleashed it.

A bolt of sheer darkness tore through the air. It slammed into a front revenant, which glowed black.

Then another glowed black.

Then the entire row glowed black until the puppeteer shrieked horribly.

They all exploded into black ash at the same moment.

“MASS YOINK!”

Hahaha, that was amazing! It worked! The pride of success gave her a glimmer of hope as the new ash only served to further slow down the assault.

She took three seconds to breathe, then cast again.

“Mass yoink! Hehe.”

Black mana returned to her. It was as much as she had spent throwing the mighty spell, perhaps even more. Once again, her stamina would determine success. She breathed deeply, and prepared to fight.

More creatures made their way up. She managed to catch the second necromancer off guard and knock her control out of whack, if only briefly. Or at least she thought it was her control. The aura felt... womanly, somehow. With the puppeteers briefly tumbling, she threw a few quick yoinks to crawlers flanking their position.

A chill ran up her back, and she turned just in time to shield her eyes. A massive dead hawk was descending upon her. She briefly saw the glint of sharpened talon.

“Squee!”

Arthur sprung up and intercepted the flier in a shower of dried feathers. There were others coming.

You have gained: danger sense at Beginner 1.

Black Hedge Witch 9

“Up!” she warned. Cernit stepped into the middle of their formation and started to take the birds down. He was doing weird movements where his blade seemed to extend. Between him and the squealing terror, they took down assailants as fast as they could swoop down. The survivors soon disengaged.

Viv returned her attention to the front and downed another line of puppeteers. They were half-way up the ramp. Then, they would need to climb a few meters up the wall which would slow them down. She had time to fire a few other shots, and she did. She alternated one tiring mass-yoink with a few smaller yoinks. By then, her mind was already numbed by effort. She had not recovered from her excess of last night. A few minutes of effort later, the first bound revenants crested the ramparts.

Viv thought that they would be pushed back relatively easily like last time. She was quite surprised when the creatures threw themselves at the soldiers with fury, using cunning maneuvers and sacrifice to overwhelm the line. They lost a man when a revenant managed to drag him out of the formation.

The Baranese still fought on.

With grim resolve, the soldiers pushed back the onslaught, supporting each other however they could. Cernit was everywhere, slicing and slashing with deadly efficiency. Jor took by himself the forward quarter of the formation, with each swing of his mighty hammer sending bones and dry flesh tumbling on the ground. Benetti was down on the courtyard, dashing to kill the revenants that fell there before they could stand up and attack their rear. They fought on for what felt like hours but could not have been more than minutes. Viv was reduced to using yoink to try and recover her strength, well protected in the center with Arthur at her feet.

Their medic died next with a rusty sword through the neck. The circle became smaller once more.

“Back!” Cernit bellowed, “back!”

That she understood.

Still in formation, they retreated to the stairs. The first soldiers took a few steps down, stabbing at revenant legs above to lessen the pressure on the others.

“Now...”

Cernit’s command was interrupted when the entire wall shuddered. Revenants and humans alike stumbled.

Viv did not stumble. She was hoisted up.

Danger Sense: Beginner 2

The motion surprised her so much that she did not try to fight it. Someone had lifted her up her feet. Arthur squealed.

The man who had grabbed her jumped forward. In less than a second, they were over the wall and falling down into an army of undead.

Fuck.

Fuckfuckfuckfucketyfuck.

She twisted on herself and threw her elbow back, using the power effect to increase the strength of the blow. There was a sound of breaking bones and the knife aimed at her back slid along her armored flank. The two smashed into ash and bone and she rolled to her feet.

She recognized the man before her. He was bald, with lacerations covering most of his face. He held a dagger with some red along its blade. His face was twisted with malice, and from his broken nose dripped two crimson trails.

The burgler. The fucking burgler.

Terror constricted her chest as she realized, briefly, how utterly and unbelievably fucked she was.

An instant later, even before she could stand down completely, a massive armor formed landed on the traitor.

She briefly recoiled when blood covered her face, as a massive vertical swing of warhammer absolutely pulped her attacker from head to waist. Again, before she could react, she was caught by the collar.

Jor had come. He must have jumped immediately after her.

The powerful knight lifted her and their eyes met briefly. He was calm. That's all she could think about.

"No leave behind," he told her placidly.

Then he tossed her in the air.

Viv flapped her legs and arms without effect. Briefly, her body twisted so that she could see below. Jor was still standing. Their eyes met again. There was an acceptance in their dark depth that stole her breath. He gave a brief nod.

A giant scorpion crashed against him and killed him on the spot.

“No!”

She reached the apex of her flight. Someone caught her leg and pulled her back in.

Cernit was there, face grim and stoic. The soldiers had pushed forward to give him a second. Another man lay dead on the ground, his throat bitten off. His unblinking gaze went up.

“Come on,” the lieutenant told her, not unkindly.

“No.”

The circle of men was pressed on all sides by ravenous undead, whose ferocity was forced by puppeteers hiding behind walls of expandable flesh. She was furious. This was all bullshit. She did not want anyone to die for her, not like this. Not because some fucking asshole had decided to betray mankind on some obscure personal crusade. That shit would not stand. She was done. She was fucking done. They wanted magic? They wanted power? She would show them some fucking power.

Something peculiar happened then. She instantly reached a state of trance and felt that she had just crossed a threshold. All those efforts, the countless casting and the experimentation were finally bearing fruits. She took the runes of ‘pierce’ and ‘overwhelm’ and lined them up where they stayed, eager, waiting, intelligent. The black mana wanted to be used. It fought its restraints with boundless enthusiasm. She just needed one final ingredient. Ah, there it was.

‘Spread’

That one started as a small circle, and extended in three branches. She drew it in her mind next to the two others.

“True mass yoink.”

A network of black spears sliced effortlessly through the surrounding mass like a power drill through butter. They burrowed deep in their quest for more mana to make theirs. They ate and took and spread and tracked, then, at the limit of their reach, they withdrew.

Mana manipulation: Intermediate 1

Black Hedge Witch: 10

Path evolutions available. You may—

You have picked: Black Witch. Mental statistics are three times more efficient when wielding black mana, only fifty percent more efficient with other types. You may not manipulate life mana. Associated skill acquisition is vastly improved.

The mana returned. It brought pain, delicious pain. There were black flames emerging from her skin where her conduits saturated. She ignored a message about mild mana poisoning. She ignored the stupid windows and their stupid messages. It was just a visual for those who could not feel. She could. She could feel it all. The tempestuous power aligned with her emotions, particularly her deep resentment.

Solfis had said that mana could be charged with concepts. Each color had associated ideas that made spells more specialized. At first, she had not understood. Now she did.

The most basic aspect of the black. The universal truth of it. They could call it death. It was part of the truth but not the truth, for death was for the living. It was change as well, but change could lead to order. Black mana only led to one kind of order: heat death. Black mana was a force of annihilation. It could be part of more, but, at the very bottom, that was it.

And she needed it right now.

The destruction of ranks upon ranks of undead had afforded them the breathing room to move on only one side. On the other one, towards the main gate, the undead still stood in thick ranks. She turned to them and walked at the edge of the formation. Her devastating strikes had once

again stunned the pair of enemy casters, and there was a lull in the carnage. That was all that she needed.

Viv lifted her arm one more time and called the rune for spread, and that was it. Despite her breakthrough and the ease with which she could cast, giving a meaning to mana was still an arduous and draining process. It took her all her focus to maintain the connection with the forming spell. She could already tell that it would be worth it.

A ball as dense as a dark star formed before her.

When she had healed Jor, she had realized that black mana appeared vicious and malevolent. A misconception. A fire was not evil just because it burnt things down. It was simply a force of nature.

That was no longer the case for the mana she held. More energy kept pouring into it as the Baranese stood dumbstruck and the revenants started to move again. More anger. She filled it with her frustration at the treachery that had killed Jor, at the necromancer who saw them as speed bumps on his stupid quest, and at the teen she had killed and who should have been in class or something. She shared her fear that she was dead. She brought forward the regret that her friends and family would have to deal with her mysterious disappearance. She ignited it with the absurdity of it all, of the loss, pain and distress that had harried her for the last miserable, painful weeks of hard-won survival.

“Blight.”

The sphere spread outward into a cloud with the speed of an arthritic grandpa. That was fine. It did not have to be fast. Soon, the entire side of the wall was covered in impenetrable darkness. She heard a sound like cold water on a red-hot pan, a furious hiss that made her wince.

On the other side, the moans and clanks were silenced. There was nothing left but the hiss.

“Go! Go! Go!” Cernit yelled. He grabbed her as she collapsed.

The survivors were now free to run. They rushed down the stairs, only to find the courtyard occupied.

Crawlers had climbed from the side wall. There had been no one to stop them. They did not have the men.

Benetti kept fending them off, fleeing gracefully between one and the other. One of his arm lay limped by his side.

The disgraced nobleman turned once to them. He saluted them with a bloodstained blade. His smile was still as snarky as before.

He charged into the mass, drawing them with him.

Viv closed her eyes. She could not do anything. She wanted to help but she could not cast a thing to save her life. Her conduits were empty. Her head hurt. She could barely walk.

They sprinted into the tower, then into her room. The last soldier slammed both doors behind him and locked the second one tight. Arthur squaked her distress and jumped on her den. Viv sat on the bed.

//Start up imminent.

//Your Grace, please place a droplet of blood on the rune engraved on my forehead.

There was no time to do anything else but comply. It was Solfis or nothing. She tried to stand up and pointed at Solfis when Cernit tried to stop her. He grabbed her under the shoulder instead.

She touched the small laceration along her right flank. It was not too deep. The skinsuit made the blood look darker. She placed a finger on the glyph. It left a bloody print there.

//Thank you, Your Grace.

//This unit... I have waited twenty years for this moment.

//You may want to step back.

She did, and Cernit swore.

Solfis' thin ribs closed around his core.

//INITIALIZING.

Two yellow orbs appeared in the skull's orbit. They shone ominously in the dark of the room like cursed lighthouses. She recognized them from his first frame, back in Harrak. The voice, too, was familiar. It had the usual intonations, but there was something sinister behind, a sort of organic snarl that even his metal frame had not possessed.

//HX-013 EXPERIMENTAL STRIKE GOLEM, DESIGNATION: SOLFIS, ACTIVATED.

//APPROVED FRAME DETECTED: DRAGON BONE MAGE-KILLER MARK 6.

//FRAME IS COMPATIBLE.

//APPROVED ENERGY CORE DETECTED.

//CORE RESERVES: 14%.

//CORE IS COMPATIBLE.

//START-UP SEQUENCE INITIATED.

The dense network of runes covering him glinted once, displaying an impossibly dense lattice of intertwined enchantments.

//ABSOLUTE OVERRIDE: IMPERIAL HEIR IN MORTAL DANGER.

//ALL LIMITERS REMOVED.

//EMPATHY MODULE: DEACTIVATED.

//DATA UPLINK: DEACTIVATED.

//DIAGNOSTICS IN PROGRESS.

Viv stepped back as Solfis' legs and arms extended and the war golem stood.

It was horrifying.

The frame was gaunt and unnaturally thin, with long legs and arms of compacted bones. It was also incredibly tall. Easily twice her size. The arms themselves reached down to its knees, ending in vicious, sharpened claws. Even the densest of village idiots would know with one look that this construct was designed for carnage.

//LOCOMOTION ONLINE.

//SENSOR SUITE ONLINE.

//ARMAMENT ONLINE.

//DEFENSIVE MEASURES ONLINE.

//COMBAT INTELLIGENCE ONLINE.

//ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.

//COMMENCING COMBAT OPERATIONS.

Viv turned to the soldiers.

"Open it! Open the damn door."

Solfis took one lazy step forward, which carried him from the table to the exit. Cernit screamed an order and the way was cleared.

A gut spiller stood on the other side. It punched towards Solfis. Viv slowed time.

Even with her perception enhanced, she could barely follow what happened next. Solfis sort of dropped down and around the blow, the sprung forth faster that she could see in a sinuous motion that propelled him through the ground floor of the uncanny valley like an upside-down rocket, to emerge into the freakish cave of ultimate fuckery below. The gut spiller fell backward with its chest gouged out.

Solfis was the apocalypse slinky.

The war golem kicked the carcass away with a three-pronged foot. The mangled remains flew through the air and smashed into something out of sight.

//THREAT ASSESSMENT COMPLETE.

//THREAT LEVEL: PATHETIC.

That was definitely still Solfis. Viv watched the Old Empire's last defender step outside. The battle ended, and the slaughter began.