

Viv traveled south for a week, sticking to side roads and evading large population centers thanks to Solfis' guidance. The undead grew in variety as the background mana lessened. There were undead animals, like bears, and she had to hide from those until they went on. She had a frightful confrontation with a large, bat-like creature with a terrible breath that only left after inspecting her for twenty minutes. That had been a motivating session of training, spent trying to extend the cloak to her feet while shielding Arthur. The creature eventually left.

Many of those, she only noticed from afar in villages that she passed by. There were towering piles of muscle and flesh, tall creatures with tentacles surrounded by crawlers moving like a single entity, and shadowy things she only spotted briefly. Solfis had names for them all, but he was sober in his explanations.

//This unit has access to several bestiaries.

//Those subgenres are known to me.

//This unit will spare you the disturbing tales of their abilities.

//Instead, this unit would like you to place the... 'nope shield' at your back.

//Try it now.

It was like having a personal trainer motivated by violence.

The night after the bat, Arthur crawled into the tent to sleep by her side.

The constant training between conversations pushed her manipulation skill further, and she was also rewarded by another landmark. Her attunement had reached 10%.

Normally, such a low number meant little. Most adults reached that level after four or five decades if they cast spells with any regularity. It was still a celebrated achievement amongst young teenage mages.

For Viv, however, it made a marked improvement in her ability to cast because of her black affinity. Her Bzzt! spell was as thick as two fingers when fully charged, and her cloak now reached mid-thigh.

Solfis' training changed again. He considered that she had a grasp of the basics that only repetition would improve, and had her do various games and activities to that effect. He always varied them. He had her try to curve her bolt, or made it very straight. Those worked well enough. He also tried to have her make her coat smoother because right now she looked like someone had dunked steaming squid ink on a cardboard helmet. That proved more difficult. At least, it was entertaining.

They met the real obstacle just as they were nearing the gap. Viv had found herself on a small plateau overlooking flat plains. She could see the gaps in the mountain range to the south, as well as hints of salvation.

Between the gaps and beyond that, the world was green. The forest was dense and imposing, but most importantly, it was quite obviously alive.

The plains were dotted with dark shrubbery as the black mana was finally fading.

It was also dotted with zombies.

The plains were not uniform and she did not have the eyes to know for sure, but close to her the creatures sat and stood at a density of one every ten paces in any directions. The landscape squirmed in the distance.

“How is this possible?” she muttered.

“Squee!”

//Your grace, my sensor range is limited.

//However, I believe that some of those revenants are not from the Harrakan Empire.

Viv agreed. The clothing style between the hundred or so creatures she could clearly see varied a lot from one to another. Even the peasant garbs were not the same. One had a linen shirt that was mostly white, while another had thicker brown coveralls made of a different undyed material. The disparity could be seen in richer clothes as well, although Viv did not know if it pointed to different lands or different eras. Some of the revenants could have been here for a while.

“The important factor here is that I cannot simply pass those by. I cannot maintain the cloak active for that long.”

//Calculating.

//This unit believes that you should walk on the mountainside.

“We already had this discussion. I am not leaving you behind.”

//There is little choice, Your Grace.

“Hmmm.”

Solfis was incredibly useful but he lacked initiative, as demonstrated before.

“How fast are those anyway?”

//Fairly slow and fairly weak, Your Grace.

//The problem is that revenants are notoriously hard to kill.

//They can even survive without a head for a minute.

//They will regenerate to the state they are currently in with the ambient dark mana, unless incinerated.

//You would eventually be swarmed.

Viv could not use Bzzt! without empowering the things.

Speaking of which...

“Solfis, I can push dark mana into people with my, ahem, elemental bolt spell, yes?”

//Your Bzzt! spell.

“You don’t have to remind me every time.

//Correct. You push mana.

“Is there a way to draw it instead?”

//Elaborate.

“Can I link with a target and draw out the black mana? It would disable the revenant, yes?”

//That...

//Calculating.

//...

//Insufficient data.

“There is no spell to drain someone of mana?”

//There is a spell used to draw life mana from a target.

//There are no spells to drag black mana from an undead.

//It would kill every practitioner.

//Except, perhaps, you.

“So, it could work.”

//Perhaps.

//Only you could do it, Your Grace.

//This unit would not know where to start.

“I do. Tell me about the drain spell.”

//The drain operates with symbols and is quite advanced.

//The basic function is simple.

//The spell worms the caster's own life mana into the target's conduits.
//A connection is maintained.
//Then, the caster pulls and draws both his and the target's life mana in.
//This spell requires the caster to be significantly stronger than the target.
//Or, for the target to be willing.

“Who would willingly submit themselves to that. Would that not be excessively unpleasant?”

//It could be used by exhausted healers to replenish their mana faster.
//Targets reported a deep sense of violation.
//Many volunteer anyway, generally to help the healer save others.

“Ok. Suppose I take the mana in, would that not poison me?”

//Only a little.
//You are poisoned by foreign, ambient mana.
//The drained mana would become yours through the process.
//Hypothetically.
//Mana that is 'yours' should not hurt you.
//Much.

“Ok, so I need to cast a bolt of black mana targeted at conduits, flood the zombie...”

//Revenant.

“...whatever, the revenant, with that mana, and once it's done I just have to pull?”

//Easier said than done.
//But, in essence yes.
//I know of a symbol that might help you.

Solfis gave a summary explanation on symbols, saying that he would teach her more later. Apparently, there was only one alphabet and it had existed since the dawn of time. It took twenty minutes for Viv to draw the squiggly thing because she had to follow Solphis' instructions to do so instead of using a model. It only worked because something clicked once she had it mostly correct, as if magic itself gave her pointers. The last few modifications made sense to her on a fundamental level.

She ended up with something like an arrow going through a spiral.

//You merely need to visualize the symbol when you cast your bolt.
//Instead of invading the flesh, it will pierce to the conduits.
//You merely have to will it so.

“Is there a symbol for pull?”

//There is.

//However, the pulling part is the easiest one.

//Using one symbol will already tire you.

//We should focus on efficiency, for now.

“I’m probably going to be pulling a lot.”

//Yes.

//If it works, you will have a surplus of mana to use for additional training.

“Sweet.”

//I shall monitor your condition.

//You must not go beyond mild poisoning again.

“Fair enough.”

Viv detached herself from the sled, gave a comforting pat to Arthur who squealed timidly, then went on to experiment.

She chose a tall boulder to stand on in case the spell failed and backlashed or something. It would be extremely embarrassing to have survived fantasy nuclear fallout, only to die by having her extremities nibbled by a B-movie prop. That would not do. The boulder would keep the dumb creature at bay for long enough to recover, she hoped. Solfis had said that they were quite dumb.

The next step was to cast the spell on a random target. She chose one of the black-aligned shrubberies.

[Dark fern: a semi-magical plant that absorbs black mana. It can be used as an alchemical ingredient of mild potency.]

Viv pointed her finger dramatically at the innocent shrub. Gestures helped with casting, one of the reasons why Solfis had her practice without it. She visualized the symbol and immediately lost the spell.

The mana dispersed harmlessly into the air.

Solfis had never told her that the thing was in three dimensions! Now it made more sense. It had a two dimensions, flattened version, but that was not as effective.

Encouraged, she tried again.

The usual black bolt crashed into the plant, only this time it had a more elastic quality to it. A bit like a garden hose, but in a horrific tentacular kind of way.

Targeting the shrub was a great idea. It had black mana to steal. She felt her own fill the conduits and—

The plant exploded with the pop of a balloon. Pieces of ashes drifted in the air.

Ok, so ferns had little mana and one very, very small conduit.

“Viviane the dread gardener makes another victim!” the witch mumbled to herself.

Viv had to stop for the next attempt. The piercing rune tired her mind as if she had been writing an essay for half an hour.

Mana manipulation has reached Beginner 8

That was helpful.

She tried again, this time pushing the nearest amount of mana into the next fern. She then pulled, and felt refreshed.

Well, not exactly. Her casting was still messy. The bolt was nowhere close to smooth. She had wasted more mana casting than she had recovered, but, well, that was a plant.

Another pause, and she was ready for the real deal. First, to find a volunteer.

She climbed down from the boulder and walked to the first revenant fifty paces or so away. The ground was sand, rocks, and dust, so she just picked a rock and threw it.

The heavy stone smacked against the creature, braining it. It fell to the ground and stopped moving.

“Well, that works too, I guess.”

She came closer and came to a realization.

“Pwaaah!”

With black mana being rarer, microbes or their magical equivalent had made a grand return and the creature smelled like a rotten body.

It was mild as corpses went. She had experienced worse in Afghanistan before, and some of the old dogs in her unit, those who had been deployed to Serbia, had horror stories about waterlogged mass graves. She could still have done without the stench.

Her cloak, the mundane one not the magical one, had a mask. She put it on. The revenant wore a tattered robe that vaguely looked vaguely priestly. She grabbed it by the shoulders and dragged, thanking unknown gods for the hermetic skinsuit. That thing had saved her life, and now it acted as protective equipment.

Once she was up the boulder and the thing was done, she cast the spell again. It went a bit wide and penetrating the conduits was harder, but she felt that her spell was a bit of an overkill. The thing barely resisted at all and she soon felt her own mana join with that of the creature. Pulling was not just easy. It was fun.

“Yoink! Hahaha. OH SH—”

Too late. Yoink joined Bzzt! in the list of embarrassing terminologies. She felt the golem’s disapproving glare on her back.

Below, the dead priest sort of blackened and fell apart. She could see pieces of skeleton below a dry, ashy substance. Interestingly, the stench lessened.

“Ah well, at least it works.”

She took a few minutes to recover, then cast again aiming at a putrefied young woman in a torn dress. Her target this time had been partially eaten, and there were claw marks on her back. It made Viv wonder how the body had ended up here. In fact, there was no way that all those people had just died here. Was she at the end point of a revenant migration pattern?

The mystery would remain for now.

“It works,” she announced proudly.

//Indeed, Your Grace, an amazing achievement.

//To invent your first spell only two weeks after your arrival!

//It would kill anyone else on the planet, unfortunately.

//Having one’s conduit flooded with black mana is usually fatal, black alignment or not.

“How come that I’m alive then?”

//I have no idea, Your Grace.

//By all accounts, you should be dead.

Viv could not squander such a precious opportunity. She immediately started an approximate rendition of the Thriller choreography. The public was not impressed. Arthur squealed in confusion.

“Tough crowd, huh? Nevermind.”

Not even a dance skill.

//When you are done, we must plan.

“Ok so I can neutralize revenants. What else do I need to know?”

//Revenants follow trends.

//If enough revenants start walking in the same direction, a rush will occur.

//That is why you should eliminate pursuers before they grow too numerous.

//You may not sleep in the open either.

“Are there any caches left on the way?”

//The sand here has spread out more.

//Some of my maps are no longer valid.

//We have to assume that all the underground caches have been buried.

“How about guard towers or similar structures? The stone buildings should be more or less intact here.”

//Indeed.

//One memory database includes the location of scout towers across the plains.

//Most of them should be standing.

//We will progress slowly. We are almost out of the Heartlands.

“I can see a forest in the distance.”

//My sensors do not extend that far.

//Do you confirm?

“Yes. it’s green and extends far to the horizon. I can’t be farther than five days away at normal speed.”

//That is a relief.

//I hope that we find new people to subjugate.

“Yes. Wait, what?”

**//To communicate with, Your Grace.
//New people to communicate with.**

“Right.”

Viv shouldered the sled harness and descended the short slope onto the vast plain.

Walking across the plain proved a new type of exhausting experience. While she was considerably less sick than before, she could no longer walk freely. Meditative trance had allowed her to surmount her fatigue. Now, she had to stop frequently to cast Yoink.

At first, she tried to move between the creatures. Unfortunately, this often resulted in having to cast the spell twice. The best solution proved to walk in a mostly straight line coming close to a revenant, killing it, then move to the next one. The mana recovered that way allowed her to keep going, but she had to pause frequently.

Mana recovered naturally, and it did so faster during meditation. The saturation allowed her to recover very quickly for someone who was still a novice caster, but it was still hard and slow going. She finally found cause to rejoice at the end of the first day,

“Hold on,” she told Solfis, “I think I saw something good.”

//Your grace?

Viv dropped the harness, then stopped.

“Tell me, Solfis, you know how the zombies—

//Revenant, Your Grace. Zombies are the products of a specific necromantic spell.

“Necromancy? As in skulls and graveyards and terrible appearance?”

//This is amazingly accurate.

//This unit thought there were no necromancers in your native world?

“Don’t sidetrack me. YOINK! Anyway. You know how the ‘revenants’ sort of turn to ash and bone when they die?”

//This is a known occurrence when undead are killed via intrusion.

//Your... spell... has a similar result to ‘exorcism’ spells used by the priesthood to destroy magically sensitive creatures.

//Those are creatures with a weak binding to their physical form or no physical form at all.

“Fine, fine. My question was, how dirty is it exactly?”

//This unit does not understand the question.

“Is that black ash sticky? Smelly? Does touching it lead to diseases?”

//....No.

//In fact, it can be used as fertilizer.

“Excellent. Hold on.”

Viv removed the harness and moved away from the sled. Arthur squealed miserably.

Solfis watched her move away Yoink! Yoink! towards a revenant in the distance. She waited as it came closer, shambling with rotten arms extended.

Revenants did not feel that dangerous when they were all moving around like piss-drunk freshmen on their first bender, but she did not let her guard down. They moved at the speed of a slow jog, which was quite fast when there were a lot of them. They were also durable, regenerated, and they could crush her windpipe in a second given the chance. The best way to survive was to kill those who went after her before they started a mass movement, then continue.

She had to conserve her strength to do so. This was the one exception.

The revenant had been a man in life. A peddler, she thought. He had a huge backpack strapped to his back with multiple belts, and wore durable travel clothes. But the prize was below.

“Yoink!”

She approached the unmoving form and inspected her loot.

[Boots of easy gait (enchanted): those cheaply enchanted boots relieve the wearer’s fatigue and protect their feet against the vagaries of travel. This item was cursed by its owner upon death.]

Not all vagaries of travel, apparently. The man still had the shaft of an arrow protruding from his neck. False advertising! Even here!

Also, a curse.

She might be able to do something about it.

Viv dragged the backpack up, snapping the arm bones at their base. Easier than undoing all those belts. She removed pieces of peddler from the loot and promptly fell on her ass.

That thing was heavy.

She dragged it back to the sled and opened it.

There were a lot of cooking pots that she threw away in anger. After reflection, she decided to keep one that looked like a wok. There were clothes including a fancy woman's dress she nabbed. She threw away the glass beads, metal tools, and found the treasure in a secret pocket: a pouch of currency.

"Money."

//This will be of use.

//But please, hurry.

Now was the time to see if her idea could work. She placed the boots on the ground and poured some of the holy water on it.

"Neriad... Ow!"

She winced in pain.

//It would be better if you did not pray to specific deities until your soul trauma is cured.

Ah.

"May you find peace in the afterlife of your own faith."

She heard a song like a whisper, and the 'cursed' part drop from the item.

"Hmm. I'm surprised that it worked."

//As is this unit.

She tried the boots. It closed comfortably around her foot as if it had been made for her. Probably some magical thingie at work.

Now she was finally properly equipped.

Her travel continued.

The two days passed making slow but careful progress. She would leave at dawn, then find a tower mid-afternoon and huddle for the night. The abundance of black mana and her practice

with the glyph awarded her with another level in mana manipulation. She felt that she was close to a breakthrough.

The idle time was also spent raising Arthur.

Her idea to treat the small dragon as a feral cat kept bearing fruits. The wily creature now understood several commands such as no, stay, come, and wait. That did not mean that she would obey them though.

Scratches were finally achieved as well.

It was brief and Viv did enjoy the feeling of warm, smooth scales, but soon Arthur huffed and retreated back to her sleeping-bag dragon lair looking like a gravely offended lady. Viv gave her space.

On the second night on the plain, Viv made camp inside of a lone guard tower standing within walking distance of a derelict village. Technically everything was within walking distance. In that case, it just meant that getting to the village took only twenty minutes or so at a jog.

The tower was on a rare elevation and gave a good view of the surrounding area. It was a simple tower with a ground floor and stone stairs to the top, from where a sentry would be able to look to the horizon. Such towers were common anywhere in the empire, Solfis had said, and used for the purpose of warning a village of monsters. A signal fire on the roof would warn nearby garrisons of an emergency. Unfortunately, the top floor had been made of wood and it was long since gone. Viv left the sled outside, but she had still dragged the golem in.

Power +1

“How does that even work?” Viv asked as she blocked the way with the crumbling door. She placed Arthur’s bedroll on the ground and started mounting the tent.

//Progress is made over time.

//But most thresholds are passed by more challenging or violent efforts.

//Soldier training alternates slow tasks and violent effort for maximum efficiency.

That sounded like interval training. Huh.

Viv took out her pot.

The door exploded inward. Something had crashed through it.

It had a fat, bulbous torso so large the opening was blocked and a horned head with multiple chin, skin white and repellent. Malevolent black eyes. And the smell!

Stone groaned under the pressure of the intruder's push. A single putrid arm wormed its way inside.

Viv stood and reached for her rifle before her brain could even process the intrusion. Her hands grasped air.

//Shield!

Viv latched on the order like a drowning woman on a buoy. The half-sphere of black mana flickered alive before her, and not an instant too soon. The creature's mouth was opening.

It vomited a pestilential torrent of something she did not see. The attack disintegrated on her cover as it disgorged from the open maw. She felt the revolting impact on her mystic sense.

She was already prepared for the next act.

The creature's massive arm pierced the shield and she slowed her time perception. The shield could only stop magic, that was fine.

She dropped it.

The arm missed her by a breath. Yellow talons brushed her armor but failed to pierce.

There was one thing about magic that Viv had understood. At its core, it was a question of will. Beyond experience and conduit and all those indexes of power, it was a question of changing reality without touching it. To will it to change.

The thing was going to kill her, Solfis, and Arthur. And so it had to die.

"Yoink."

Viv's voice was glacial behind the comical incantation. A bolt of pure void bit into the creature's chest with voracious strength. Her might smashed into its conduit like a torrent, bursting through its massive metaphysical body like a tsunami through a beaver dam. She poured her defiance and her frustration until everything inside of the beast was hers, until it was all her. Until there was nothing else left.

Then, she pulled.

The torrential black mana that returned coursed through her. She lifted her right hand, willed a black flame to appear. The mana answered faithfully, as she knew it would. The magic danced for her, happy and... alive.

The monster crashed to the ground, slain in a moment.

She could get used to that shit.

Mana manipulation has reached intermediate 1

Acuity +1

Mana channels: nascent

Black Hedge Witch (5)

She felt it then, it all sort of clicked together. Some of the black mana stayed inside of her, more than usual. It smoothed more easily. She understood more and was understood in return.

“What is mana?”

//A magnificent result, Your Grace.

“Squee!”

“Oh, yeah sorry, getting carried away I guess.”

The congratulations died right there in awkwardness. Solfis was contemplating something. Arthur looked from the dead thing to Viv, then back to the dead thing with wide eyes. Viv felt mildly offended by the dragonette’s obvious incredulity. She was also wondering how the fuck they were going to get out with that lard in the path. She also hoped the sled was still intact.

//Your grace, this unit wonders if you were a combatant in your previous life.

“I was. I was good too!” she exclaimed, somewhat defensively. It was not entirely true. She had barely passed the prerequisite for the special forces qualifications, but it had been hard and she had passed. So there.

//Your Grace, your battle instincts are commendable.
//This unit will work towards integrating your magic into them.
//It seems to be urgent.

“Right. Any idea what that was? Should I expect more?”

//This is a gut spiller.
//A specimen of good size.
//Although, they can be surprisingly silent when they move.
//Especially on sand.
//It must have come from the nearby village.

“Will this sort of thing happen again?”

//This unit has too little available data to predict the distribution of the nearby undead population.
//This unit will only select remote locations from now on.
//This unit has a request.

“Do tell.”

//Can you collect the skull of the creature?
//Please.

Something finally clicked in Viv’s tired mind.

“Are you trying to have me build a bone frame for you?” Viv asked.

//Yes.
//And this unit believes that it has enough.
//Unfortunately, your intensive help would be required.
//Short-term survival will remain our priority.

“Understood. For now, tell me about mana.”

Solfis obliged for part of the evening before having her train more. He mentioned several hypotheses from great sages across the eras. They all had ideas, but the only thing they really

agreed on was that Nyil was a little bit alive and that life permeated all of reality, making it malleable. That was reasonably cool. She did think that, if the world was alive, then it was a little bit of a dick, what with all the monsters around.

She went to sleep later and Arthur condescended to some evening petting, but only for five seconds because obviously killing a massive undead abomination with a single spell was still only a middling achievement and she would have to do better in the future.

Morning was dark because the thing still blocked the door. At least it no longer smelled. Viv sighed, retrieved its head and took out her shovel. It took her an hour to clear enough black ash to drag Solfis' fat arse through. Then, they were gone.

On the third day, Viv walked faster. Every time she crested a small hill, she could see the edge of the forest, tantalizingly close. The deep, shiny green of life lured her with the promise of cover and, perhaps, humanity. The main problem was that the revenant density kept increasing. They covered the land and she had to slow down to a lazy walk to be able to kill them as she went. She saw fresh ones and old ones. Some were more damaged than others. Some still wore tattered rich coats or mail armor, or heavy cloaks designed for cold weather. Some only wore loincloth and that was a sight she could have done without.

It was midday, and she was out in the open when she heard something that stupefied her: trotting horses.

Behind her in the distance, she spotted a trio of riders on things that definitely looked like heavy horses. They and the mounts wore mail and leather, as well as knight helms with closed visors. They also wielded strange polearms. The blade was a half-moon with the concave part facing outward. It looked like it was designed to keep things at bay.

The riders spotted her and made their way forth without stopping.

That was kind of hostile.

She inspected the lead figure.

[Baranese knight: dangerous]

That was a human for sure and she thought the chance was high that they would not attack if they could help it. She removed her hood and mask to expose her face and made large, waving signs.

“Quick, Solfis, what’s the universal sign for peace.”

//An open hand, Your Grace.

“Should I try to hide you?”

//No, Your Grace.

//They will see my frame and wonder what I am.

//Honesty is more valuable than secrecy here.

//Because secrecy cannot be achieved.

//I did not expect us to be intercepted like that.

“Ok. If they don’t stop, I’ll hide behind you and start blasting.”

//I hope it will not come to that, Your Grace.

//Look, they are slowing down.

Lieutenant Cernit’s perspective.

The fort patrol had been looking hard these past few days, and they had finally found something. It was not what they expected.

Fort Stone had fallen. They had seen the alarm signal in the distance, then the smoke afterward. They knew the deal. Fallen forts meant powerful undead or necromancers, and powerful undead did not set things on fire. They had to try and locate the rogue caster, if only so that they could light their own alarm before undead swarmed over the walls in the vain hope that someone, anyone, would come.

What they had found was a trail of dead revenants.

Now, revenants were a pain. They were slow and not so dangerous by themselves, but there were a lot of them on the dead plains and they liked to swarm. They were also notoriously hard to put down for good. The black mana that saturated the place helped them regenerate to their original mangled forms if they were not destroyed, and only fire or a priest could purify them. A trail of bodies, now that was something. Cernit had led them in pursuit. He half-expected to find a necromancer at the end of the trail, and perhaps even catch them with their pants down. For a moment, he thought he had when he spotted the strange carriage in the distance.

“It appears to be a corpse cart,” Benetti had commented, as aloof as always. Jor had said nothing.

“Gentlemen, it has been a pleasure. Good luck,” he had retorted.

He gave them one chance in three. That was the best they would get.

But then, something unexpected had happened. The person they had taken for a necromancer had removed their cloak and was now jumping up and down and waving in a slightly idiotic manner. They were not casting. The dead were not converging on them.

“Hold,” he said, and the others slowed down too.

Cernit forced a calm breath. He would have tried his damndest to slay a necromancer and give the foot soldiers back at the fort a chance. He was not particularly eager to meet his end, though.

The closer they got and the weirder things went. First, the not-a-necromancer was a beautiful young woman with close-cropped auburn hair and an ecstatic smile. Then, she was not wearing cursed robes but an eclectic mix of faded magical equipment like the last descendant of a ruined noble family. He came closer and realized the cart was, in fact, a makeshift sled holding large bones. When they stopped by her side, he found out that she had brilliant green eyes, something that was beyond rare in these parts, as well as the most advanced case of black mana poisoning he had ever seen. He could spot the shadowy veins snaking under her skin from his saddle. She should be screaming on the ground and halfway towards turning into a revenant herself by now.

By then, Cernit was completely at a loss. He inspected the strange apparition.

[Witch]

His instincts and [danger sense] skill flashed in alarm. She was not as strong as some of the war mages he had supported back when he had been at the front. She was still a caster. At least she was friendly. Weirdly so.

The only thing worse than a friendly caster was a pissed off one.

Then the woman started talking in an elegant, lilting voice. The words sounded like advanced military terms.

“Is... is that Old Imperial?” he asked Benetti.

“Yes. My classical education finally proves itself useful. Although I may be a tad rusty. Hold on, allow me to... is that... a golem part?!” the disgraced nobleman answered.

The next words came in a mechanical voice that sent shivers down his spine. He recognized every word from the day he was knighted at the royal palace. It had been an eternity ago.

//Bow and pay your respects to the Princess Bob, commoners.

The three riders froze in their seats. Benetti leaned towards him.

“That, lieutenant, is the weirdest thing I’ve ever witnessed in my entire damn life.”

A cover on the sled popped out and a serpentine head emerged.

“Squee!”

“How about now?” Cernit deadpanned.

The appearance of a tamed drake threw the group into a state of consternation. At least Cernit assumed it was tame.

“Chief?” Jor asked.

Both of the riders turned to him, as Jor speaking was a momentous event that occurred on average once every tenday.

“Is this the afterlife?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

And that was it. Cernit admitted that he found the strangeness of the situation disconcerting.

The golem and the woman spoke again and Benetti answered in broken Old Imperial. He promptly turned to his officer.

“The woman wants us to attach the thing she is dragging to a horse and go to our fort.”

“With her?”

“I would assume so, yes. And the golem is threatening us.”

“Hmm,” Cernit replied. Everyone knew how stupid refusing a caster was. The woman was a witch though, a wild one. He had to make sure.

“Can we ascertain that she is not...”

He realized that the word for necromancers was copied from Old Imperial. Like almost every technical term in his language.

“...one who orders the dead around,” he finished, lamely.

Just then the woman frowned and turned to a revenant that had ventured too close.

“Yoink.”

The thing fell dead.

“Is there such a thing as a decromancer?” he asked Benetti.

The disgraced gentleman stared.

“Uncromancer? Redeader?”

“I think you can stop talking, lieutenant. And she can call herself what she wants if she kills the things. Help me strap that thing to Bali.”

He climbed down from his horse and stepped closer to the witch, who was currently killing the few revenants ambling their way with calm detachment.

She was tall. Maybe even the size of Jor. And she was beautiful even if her cheeks were a bit hollow. She glared down imperiously.

“Err. Hello,” he greeted in Old Imperial.

“Vivane,” she said, and pointed at her chest.

She made weird sounds, like the buzz of fire wasps.

“Bibiane?”

The woman groaned and slapped her forehead. She pressed him on and he hurried to attach the sled in embarrassed silence. There were too many questions but one thing was sure, the woman was an unknown and, right now, any unknown was good. It would take a miracle to live to see spring.

“Yoink!”

The woman climbed behind Jor, who had the biggest horse. It appeared that he could, in fact, be nervous.

Cernit shook his head one last time and they made their way back at a sedate pace.

“Yoink.”

That was the most outlandish spell he'd ever heard.