

Nothing much happened during the next hour, so Viv stepped down and returned to her tower. Arthur was so agitated that she actively sought pampering, which was rare. Viv sat on her bed and petted the small dragon's back and neck, marveling once more on how smooth and warm the scales were.

//Your Grace, if you have enough energy...

"Ah, yes, you are right.

Viv had recovered from the very mild mana poisoning she had gained over her several outings, but it would be unwise to get a fever so early in the battle. She stood before the golem's exposed core to empty her overtaxed conduits.

Solfis had changed considerably since they arrived here. His days and night of ceaseless labor now bore impressive fruits. The core was clad in a protective layer of folded bear ribs, with the bones broken and fused again until they took the appearance of banded armor. Small openings allowed her and him temporary access to vital compartments until they were sealed shut again. He also had fully formed legs and arms made of dragon wings. They were crossed over his chest now so that his form could remain compact, but she could tell that he would be immensely tall. Taller than the tallest human she had come across. It would be a lean and sinuous and alien build, she could tell. His humanoid appearance was already... unsettling.

"How are we looking?"

//My core is approaching 8% maximal charge.

//It will allow me several minutes of operation at full battle potential.

//It might be enough.

//However, a higher charge will give me more options and reduce our chances of failure.

'Hmm.'

She placed her black-clad hand against the core and unleashed her power in. It gulped her mana with endless thirst. Sometimes, it felt like filling the Danaides' barrel: as if the bottom was pierced and her task was pointless and endless. Only Solfis' assurance pushed her doubts away.

The bones shone when she began. Solfis' body was the expected ivory color, except for innumerable runes covering its surface. They were written in tiny scripts with exquisite care and the unflinching precision of their owner's machine mind. It was a tiresome and systematic task. It suited Solfis well.

She finished, and the ribcage closed with nary a noise. The dense lattice looked unnaturally sturdy. Creepy as fuck too.

She glanced up and into a pair of empty orbits.

Solfis had selected the skull of the massive gut spiller she had killed in that tower, what felt like ages ago. It was strangely humanoid except for a pair of thick horns pointing upward and slightly inward. He was now in the process of engraving it with more care and attention than any other part. A large and complex glyph already covered part of its brow.

The runes and horns gave him a devilish countenance that she was not entirely comfortable with. His appearance was too close to that of an undead for comfort.

//Does my appearance... upset you, Your Grace?

“A little bit. I know that you are still you, do not worry.

//This unit gives you credit for overcoming your instinct, Your Grace.

//However, this unit would recommend that, in the future, you relied on them.

//Not for me, of course.

//This unit is yours for all of eternity.

“All of it?”

//Well, until you die, Your Grace.

//An unfortunate consequence of your own failing fleshiness.

//But fret not, we will accomplish much before it happens.

“I appreciate your trust. Looking outside, I kind of think you might be overconfident.”

//There is always a margin for error, Your Grace.

//But this unit always goes for the winning move.

//And the winning move, right now, is you.

//Hold the line, and you and I will live.

Viv nodded and returned to Arthur’s worried form. What Solfis just said suddenly hit her.

“What do you mean, you and I? What about the others?”

The golem’s answer was immediate and unsettling.

//They do not matter.

//They will never matter to me.

“What if I want them to matter? We fight side by side. I do not know the customs of Harrak, but where I am from it meant something.

**//Your survival is a hard-coded directive that I cannot knowingly circumvent.
//If their demise means your survival, this unit will not hesitate.
//This unit will never hesitate.**

“Look, I would prefer if your plans included the survival of our allies from now on.”

**//Their presence improves our odds.
//Therefore they do, Your Grace.
//As long as yours is guaranteed.
//Consider what will happen to them should you fall.
//Because your allies already realized it.**

He was right. If she fell, there would be no one left to stop the horde. The three knights had struggled against a handful of dangerous targets, and there were dozens still out there.

“I’ll just have to be careful.”

Viv returned to her bed and settled for a quick nap, with her armor still on. She woke up half an hour later to no specific change. The courtyard outside was empty but Jor was standing guard by her door. He turned around when he heard her.

“Food,” he said, pointing at the mess hall. The cook was on the wall with the rest, but there were platters of jerky and other stuff that could be eaten cold. She sat alone and loaded up. Jor followed her and kept a silent vigil. When she was done, she climbed up.

On top of the wall, the soldiers were sitting down in clumps, resting and talking in low voices. Visibility had not improved much, however.

“They are waiting,” Benetti said.

“Waiting?”

The sharp knight pointed at the tower above her room, where a sentry sat at all times.

“No movement,” he explained, “for now.”

“They will attack again, though.”

“Yes. Necromancer early on their path. Cannot stay out of contained camp for too long, or mana poisoning. Time is not on their side.”

“Hmm.”

She sat down for a while, but Cernit soon sent her back to her room.

“You must rest now. After, no time to rest,” he said. Already, some of the soldiers had gone down and others had returned with covers. The air was still cold, for now, and the smouldering pyre before them did little to change that. Seeing that she had nothing better to do, she headed back.

Once more, the situation was strange. The world was magic, she was trapped with knights and a dragon inside of a fort besieged by the undead, and it was just stressful boredom.

Viv sat down on her bed with Arthur placing her tail on her lap, and meditated.

It was probably the best use of her time.

She started by remembering all the runes she had seen from the book. Many of them related to traps and triggers. She suspected that there were other runes that were part of such spells, and were not listed there. She had some ideas about the rest, however. She started by visualizing one by one, and then some of them together. Every time, the strain on her mind grew considerably, but she thought she could perhaps use two or three runes at the same time without fainting.

That was another aspect of magic affecting her. She could keep in her mind more complex constructs than ever before. It was like looking at a dense blueprint, and then being able to visualize it in its entirety, with all the tiny details. She was sure that her neurons had not suddenly multiplied or something, therefore, magic was helping her process stuff better and faster. How did it work? She had no idea.

The hours went by. She only stopped to rest, feed Arthur, and check on the walls. The situation had not changed. It was back to waiting.

Night fell. The wall became illuminated by mana stones carried by soldiers, shining the same pale hue as military-grade spotlights, though not with the same intensity. The revealed nothing but corpses.

With nothing better to do, Viv went to sleep in full armor.

Her sleep was light and fitful, packed with nightmares. In one, she killed the necromancer only for his face to be Damien's, her brother. In another, she was surrounded on all sides by undead and her spells failed to kill them. No matter how fast she ran, there were more and more of them harrying them until they surrounded her and—

She woke up with a jolt. Arthur was stomping on her, wings tense. Her white head swivelled from side to side.

Viv did not hesitate. She jumped out and rushed out.

//Be careful, Your Grace.

//No matter what, you cannot fall.

“I know!”

She slammed the door to the inner structure open, then went through the one that led out. It only opened partway. There was a body on the ground. The body swore and jumped up, revealing the worried face of Benetti.

“What?”

“I don’t know!” she spat. She moved to the center and stood around, inspecting the inner walls, the buildings. There was still nothing.

A sentry screamed then fell silent.

Benetti bellowed something but Viv did not care. A soldier’s corpse fell from the wall opposite the main undead army. The fuckers must have climbed from the other side.

A crawler made its way to the stair in sinuous movements. It was a bit too far so Viv overcharged her spell.

“YOINK!”

The mighty dark bolt caught the creature on the flank and turned it to ash. There had been no passenger. The necromancer must have put them in position, then released his hold. That could only mean...

Cernit whistled and the noise of hundreds of stomping feet came from the main gate. She had to hurry.

Benetti grabbed her brusquely and pointed somewhere above the barracks. She cast immediately, and released the spell as a form jumped from the roof. It caught the creature in the neck. A pile of ashy bones crumbled on the floor a few meters away from her.

“Worst way to wake up pretty woman,” Benetti lamented. Viv could think of a few, but she appreciated the man’s efforts to be casual. They went back to back, slowly making their way to the main wall where battle was raging.

Another crawler topped the wall behind them, and Viv waited for it to grow closer before killing it.

A noise to the side distracted her, a terrible crunch. A corpse had crashed from the tower’s top.

“Shit.”

A crawler slammed on the courtyard’s dry surface an instant later. It jumped at her.

Viv slowed her time perception. She overcharged a first yoink and unleashed it at the beast coming from the side, before turning her attention to the tower one. Benetti was already rotating to meet the attack head on.

With a deafening ‘Skree!’, Arthur charged the beast from the side, managing to abort its assault. The crawler still managed to roll on itself and throw the dragon off mid-lunge. It landed on all four and attacked again, only to receive a yoink in its face.

Viv ran to the small dragonette. She let out a sigh of relief when her little monster climbed back to its feet and shook her head. She was unharmed.

The crawler’s speed and power came as one more reminder of how powerful those undead really were. Only her bullshit spell allowed her to survive.

Vic thought that, shit, she should have locked the door. Now the small dragon was out and there was nothing she could do about it. For starters, Arthur was probably stronger than her.

She shook her head and refocused on the battle. Benetti was already rushing up the front wall where the battle was the fiercest. She followed and started throwing spells as soon as she tipped the wall.

The battlements were heavily contested. Three crawlers had managed to get on and they were held at bay by trios of soldiers, who managed to push them away through concerted efforts and the use of pole arms. It gave the revenants free reign to climb up.

Her first spell took a crawler on the side, turning it to ash before it could even fall. As soon as she did so, the other two disengaged. They jumped back into the darkness below.

Viv checked for priority targets and found none. What she had was a fuckton of revenants.

It was enough.

The necromancers did not have to risk any more valuable elite. It had achieved its goal. The perimeter was breached.

Unless she could do something about it.

The area directly next to the stair was empty, for now. Jor guarded it with calm determination. Viv knew this was going to hurt like a bitch, just as she knew that she would do it. She would succeed.

“Yoink.

Yoink.

Yoink.”

The stupid shortcut sounded through the deafening din of battle. One revenant fell, then another, then another. Every second, a black ray would rob one of its unnatural life and add it back to the hedge witch’s reserves. Slowly, the pressure lessened on Jor until he could repulse the revenants climbing the wall. She turned to the next beleaguered group that Benetti had joined and kept at it.

“Yoink.”

Viv fell into the zone, the strange state of mind that she had experienced on earth and that meditative trance had elevated to new levels. For one moment, she worried about her

uncovered back. It almost broke her concentration. With the return of sensation came a realization, however. There was a tail wrapped around her chest, and a weight on her shoulder. She was safe.

And they were not.

Spell after spell after spell without stopping, until her mana inevitably turned low, until wariness, then pain, replaced the elation of magic. Her speed slowed down. Her arm wavered. Still, she persevered. The horde was ground to dust piece by piece, creature by creature. Viv skirted the edge of agony, then of consciousness. It was not desperation that kept her going.

It was pride.

The revenants were the necromancer's pawns and the soldiers hers in a match for survival. She would not capitulate to someone who used botched shortcuts to power. Not after being trained by the best of the best, in the person of a fucking fantasy AI. No. She refused. Either they would show an absolutely amazing display of skill and intellect, or they would die. Their window was short. They just did not know it yet.

She looked for her next target and found none.

The trance broke.

Someone was keeping her upright, while Arthur was sitting to the side in silent vigil. The stone battlement beneath her had disappeared in a sea of calf-high ash. The pale light of mana stones showed a world of blood, dust, and grime. The scent of burned flesh was thick in the air with large, sooty clouds rising up beyond the glare of illumination and into the abyss of the night sky. She vaguely thought that it should be dawn. It was still night.

Pain came. It was a new kind that burnt from within.

Pain Tolerance: Intermediate 8

Willpower +1

You have reached a milestone! Your ability to focus for extended periods of time is vastly improved. Your ability to recover mana and mental fatigue is vastly improved. You recover from deep exhaustion much faster. You can keep casting low level spells even when exhausted.

Black Hedge Witch: 8

It did not help, not enough. She dry heaved and tried to collapse, in vain. The one who had grabbed her shoulder would not let her fall. Everything hurt. Everything burnt. She wanted to faint. It would not come.

Someone placed a flask against her dry lips and a sweet liquid dropped down her throat.

It was the best thing she had ever tasted.

It was her favorite cold drink on a hot summer day. It was perfect mulled wine on the night of the winter solstice. It was... perfect.

Warmth spread through her. She let out a gasping breath and let the darkness take her.