

The march was mayhem. It began fine enough right after leaving the original compound, however, that did not last long. Undead ambushes started appearing behind literally every corner and it was a clown car of horrors: Venomous moles digging into concrete and hiding there; mobile undead mages throwing long range spells to harass them; ghouls disguised as panicked civilians - often hidden in groups of actual one; poisoned bombs, delivered through undead birds; undead dropping at them from windows nine metres above; magical mines; completely mundane mines taken from who knows where; sabotaged buildings collapsing while going past them... and so much more.

It was not just about the individual problems being so bad - there were several decently powerful mages present. It was about the sheer *variety* of things the company of soldiers had to survive, one after the other. In fact that several could happen at once.

What didn't help either was logistics. They need to go up to the 11th city level which was the floor of the four compounds closest to the Spires themselves which Elizabeth had called a ralley to. But how does one get the soldiers all the way up there? The elevators were too dangerous, therefore they had to use the stairs. That was a prime opportunity for ambushes, not to mention that they had to somehow get up their equipment, usually occupying several mages competent with lifting via magical platforms, including Irwyn.

Which meant they would be occupied for the inevitable attacks. If there was one certainty it was being *always* under siege. Irwyn had an inkling that most of the zombies and ghouls were *very* freshly raised, then sent for the explicit purpose of exhausting them. Inflict attrition - and they were certainly slowly losing people and stamina. Irwyn was fine for the moment, and unlikely to run out of mana, but he expected the mental toll would start affecting him eventually. But many mages were already starting to feel vessel exhaustion and the regular soldiers were getting tired as well. Potions, pills, scrolls and other such replenishing consumables were being rationed.

All of those problems were nothing when compared to the greater undead.

"Three flesh hulks up ahead," the major announced with a frown what a scout had told him. The man, as it turned out, was a competent Void mage that could match Irwyn and Elizabeth in most magics. "They are sitting right in the middle of an intersection. Going around would delay us by up to a quarter of an hour and walk through the poisoned mists again. This is no coincidence. A trap."

"So we will have to force our way through," Elizabeth sighed. "We don't know what else is waiting in ambush. This could be costly."

"Leave one of them to me," Irwyn said, causing several of the officers in their little command gathering to stare at him. It was not the first one they had run into flesh hulks but Irwyn had been relegated to mostly protective duties to minimize their losses so far. Being able to easily block Light magic was valuable when the majority of their forces considered it a critical weakness.

"They need to be dispatched quickly," the major frowned even deeper, though that was not surprising. Even Irwyn could see the man did not like nor respect him. The signs of prejudiced anger were plain... and it was likely no coincidence that it had taken the man one look at his mask to realize there was a connection with the underworld there. "We should consider, regretfully, sacrificing some troops to delay them while we focus fire."

"I have had time to figure out a spell to counter greater undead specifically," Irwyn explained. "Hopefully, I should be able to dispatch one efficiently without much issue."

"New spells risk backfiring which would put you out of commission for the rest of the day," the major was not happy with it though. "Although my plan will cost us, it will be safer. It is better to take losses than risks in our situation."

"Except it doesn't account for whatever trap there is," Irwyn shook his head, then turned towards Elizabeth. "It could be worse than the flesh hulks. I am confident in not incapacitating myself, as major the major fears, and the spell I have made for myself will see use today regardless of any opinions. I think this is a good opportunity to reveal it," the undead would 'spread the word' - for the lack of a better term - once it was used. That did not mean it would not be effective but the first time or few the undead would not be able to react properly.

"Your plans are not mutually exclusive," Elizabeth looked at them both. She seemed nervous under the weight of command though mostly hid it. Irwyn did not envy her being the final decision maker though was glad he had her faith. "Mockingbird can hold one down. If he can dispatch it on his own, that is ideal, even if he fails it will serve as your distraction."

"We could use his firepower for our main target," the major glanced at Irwyn, "Though perhaps without the clashing affinities, it is not a major loss."

"Give the orders then, we cannot waste time," she affirmed and the officers broke up. Less than a minute later the company was on the move with Irwyn at the front. A line of cannons was already firing as a new swarm of zombies attacking from the back.

"Please actually be careful," Elizabeth said in a low voice as he walked beside her. "Without access to the dimensional features of my dress, I won't have access to proper healing equipment."

"You worry too much," Irwyn tried to reassure. "When have I ever disappointed in magic?"

"Fair..." she said, looking ahead. "There they are. Good luck."

"To you as well," Irwyn nodded, looking at the three flesh hulks. They were similar to the ones they had fought before though Irwyn now knew they could have variations. The few that the company had carefully dispatched had not been filled with the magic-eating maggots though one of them had exploded into a cloud of magical acid. Irwyn hope that it would not matter either way as he approached from the side. The undead were already stirring as the company advanced toward them. The ground did not seem trapped as far as Irwyn could tell so that was good.

The first heaps of spell-slinging flesh were thrown a moment later. None headed towards Irwyn though and all were intercepted before unleashing any magics. A swarm of Void insect-like particles was already rising behind them and most of the best mages available would take part in this battle, the remaining few only left behind to watch their back. The hulks seemed to quickly process that throwing their torn-off junks had limited effect and instead proceeded to create those spikes of conjured rock to carry them at high speed. Irwyn saw that as an opportunity to chant.

“Since the great Betrayal
that has made us frail,
tried reduce us to dust,
we stood for what is just.
We took a stand.
Deathbane Starbrand”

And what better to speak of than the first Betrayal when crafting a spell against the undead? Irwyn had seen the aftermath, if only in a vision. But those seemed to work well enough as a *connection* to empower his incantations. In the vision he had also seen a frailty of the mind that the Betrayal had caused, and that was certainly not a rare emotion. ‘Dust’ was an obvious thing to mention given the infamous quote of ‘until all is dust’ that supposedly drove undead hatred. Justice and taking a stand were self-explanatory against a force seeking the utter annihilation of everything.

Of course, it was not about just the meaning and the words. Yes, they helped close the gaps but Irwyn had to have a baseline for the spell to work off of. The inner mechanics of the magic. And he thought of what Elizabeth had advised him earlier in the day: The best way to deal with the undead was often to burn away the soul that held them together. The flesh of the hulks was resistant to both spells and physical injury to an absurd degree... but perhaps he need not target it at all.

Phase, Bypass, Penetrate, three concepts to hopefully get through, *Seek*, to find the corrupted souls and *Burn* to destroy them. Now, Irwyn knew basically nothing of soul magic but he was not really manipulating a soul in any way. He was just trying to target it, surgically, as if burning a shape into wood. There were definitely huge gaps in his understanding of how this would actually work...

But then, that’s what the incantation was for. All of it focused on fighting, hating or destroying undead. Even the name itself contained ‘Deathbane’. The spell would be completely unusable against anything living. But that was fine. Because spells gained power from being restrictive. He really hoped it would be enough as he finished casting it, targeting the left-most hulk.

What Irwyn immediately noticed was that the spell was difficult to maintain. That had been a given since it was a five-intention construct, however, it was more difficult than a single-instance spell would usually be. He explained that to himself as the cost of filling the gaps in his own knowledge. As it happened, it was not far from the boundary where he could only maintain his four-intention shield beside the Brand.

Then it started taking effect. There was a moment for it to actually connect: It flew like a swift ray of starlight – incredibly fast - but was still *technically* speaking dodgeable or, more realistically, blockable. The flesh hulks did not bother with physical barriers though so it was struck. Instantly a mark was burned into its skin.

Irwyn had imagined the Brand part of the spell to be a circle without having a particularly distinct image for it but when it started to appear he immediately got a sense of *deja vu*. What he could see was just a small part of it, but he had seen that shape before. It was not difficult to recall where: What he beheld was exactly a small excerpt from that strange mark with impossible geometry Han Daut had used to craft the Starfire amplifying artifact.

And the moment a connection with that memory was made, everything *snapped* right into place. The mark - that inexplicably gave the impression it was **WEeping** - burned itself into the undead. It managed to attain a strange juxtaposition of existence. Logically, the geometry simply wasn't possible; realistically it did not care as far as Irwyn could see.

That wonder lasted for about a second before Irwyn was woken up by the undead *shrieking*. It was... not a sound. More like an echo of a tortured sound Irwyn could only half-hear. What was stranger was that the undead had reacted at all. He had never seen one do anything like that, not even the slightest flinch or hesitation. Each one he had encountered was completely and utterly focused on killing anything living.

Then again, their bodies were dead. They could not experience physical pain as far as Irwyn understood and when their souls were finally exposed without their body they would be erased in an instant. Too fast to really have a perceptible reaction to their own demise.

The hulk's death was not quick. It tried to charge Irwyn immediately... and stumbled. The hooks of conjured rock that held it aloft did not move properly. It swayed, its muscles *spasmed* even though that should not even be possible.

Then it dropped, fell over, and didn't get up. Irwyn felt the core soul controlling the construct perish, incinerated by raging intangible Starfire. The efficacy of the spell far surpassed what Irwyn had hoped for.

The hulk retained its horrific shape, however, it was motionless. It also most likely lost most of its spell resistance if past experience was anything to go by. That didn't mean it could just be left like that. There were still many corrupted souls locked in the motionless abomination that it had been using as sources for its myriad magics. Those could be *reclaimed* by other undead if left unattended. Irwyn went to burn them with a simple *Burn* and *Incinerate* infused Starfire. Since that was no longer consuming the vast majority of what his mind could handle, he could look at the other two hulks being engaged.

In truth, his fight had been rather quick... taking perhaps less than a dozen seconds. Elizabeth was not quite done. Irwyn watched the remaining flesh hulks both attempts to teleport, only to be disrupted by a squad of dedicated space mages. The backlash tore grievous wounds across the undeads' bodies, though those remained as inconsequential as ever.

Elizabeth was in the middle of tearing a hole through one while it was getting swarmed by the Void flies as well as a whole barrage of Void other magic's. Meanwhile, the other hulk was facing significantly less firepower, mostly just to keep it distracted before the rest could move on to it.

Putting Starfire into all that Void magic was not going to be of any help, therefore Irwyn instead looked around. There should be *an* ambush. Some kind of trick at play. The question was only how serious. So, his eyes wandered each way of the intersection... and found little of interest. He had never been like Kalista nor was spotting discrepancies his most mastered skill. The only strange thing was how the wide streets were so utterly empty, which was easily explained by the ongoing undead incursion.

The companies had dispatched the first flesh hulk after a few moments and were moving on to another. Still nothing. Irwyn frowned. The undead had given them no respite so far, it would be strange if they didn't use this as an opportunity. He still saw nor felt anything off but he did

reinforce his barrier with two more layers. Something *had* to be coming. The concentrated magics were quickly wearing down the second hulk. Far too long to not be ambushed. It genuinely put Irwyn more on edge than being actively attacked.

It finally came in seemingly the same moment the second flesh hulk was destroyed. Irwyn's eyes were looking at one of the soldiers also on the lookout rather than directly participating when a white glowing spear sprung from the solid concrete and impaled them.

"BELOW!" Irwyn immediately shouted as he felt something else attempt to do the same to him. Except Irwyn had kept the ground beneath his feet also shielded.

Many of the soldiers had not. The first strike had scored several fatal wounds among regular soldiers and mages.

"GHOSTS!" the swarm magic captain shouted a moment later. "THEY WON'T LEAVE THE CONCRETE UNLESS YOU MAKE THEM!"

And indeed, the spear retracted back beneath - at least those that had not been destroyed - and then proceeded to strike others. Not Irwyn, nor any of the mages that had blocked the first attempt. They were looking for those vulnerable to this kind of assault, even if it cost the ghosts their lives. A suicide attack with the sole purpose of causing losses and exhausting them further. The undead could trade ten thousand to one and still come out ahead. Despite breaking who knew how many thousands, their numbers were likely only swelling.

Irwyn immediately began melting the concrete and the ghosts with it. Everywhere he could see those spears attempting to strike he would destroy their wielders, blocking the impaling lunges for others if needed. The ghosts were fragile, immediately burning away and their attacks could not break through any remotely competent defense.

Still, each could be another loss on the tally. Another bit of mana that a mage would later not be able to turn into killing something else. They were not being *overwhelmed*; they were being worn down. At least that is what he had thought had been the strategy. That was, until he looked up after helping avert the worst of the ambushes.

"Elizabeth," he hurried over as soon as he spotted the issue. The ghosts had lasted only moments and were already being cleaned up less than a minute after the initial strike. The major - who was standing right by her - seemed to disapprove of an address without honorifics but also listened, seemingly sizing Irwyn up and down again as he spoke. "We have a problem, look," he pointed down the road ahead which ended much further in another intersection. There, at basically the horizon, a grey mass of bodies was rushing at them. Fast. It had rushed out of whatever cover might have hidden it while the company was distracted by the ghosts.

"Major reporting, large hostile horde approaching from the south," one of the information officers was also just coming up to them. "Several flesh hulks and other greater undead spotted among them."

"Same bad news from the East," another person was approaching but paused as they heard the previous record being given out loud. It quickly became apparent why they, and two more soldiers, also wanted to speak with the major as soon as they could.

"And West."

“And North.”

“We are surrounded,” the major noted. Then swore. “Fuck.”

“This is the real trap,” Irwyn’s mind was spinning. They could not handle that many. Not with their current forces.

“We cannot call for help with communication still being blocked,” Elizabeth frowned. “We will have to fight them off somehow.”

“There are too many greater undead,” the major sighed. “A futile last stand it is. Give the order. Build whatever little fortifications the men can. Spread the word we are having a Desperado.”

“Desperado?” Irwyn raised an eyebrow.

“A last stand with no hope of survival,” the major nodded. “Meaning they are allowed to use up anything we have left if it means an extra dead ghoul in exchange.”

“I can try to hold off in the North,” Irwyn thought about the situation looking in the direction. It was grim. “I am not sure I will manage it thought.”

“Insanity,” the major shook his head. “Also counterproductive. Our primary objective has not changed. We will do everything in our power to create a wedge for the Ladyship to slip through. And, reluctantly, you with her.”

“That will take too many losses,” Elizabeth shook her head. “At that attrition, your chain of command and roles will fall apart completely.”

“I am assuming we will be wiped out either way,” the major disagreed. “Our first priority is clear. If we must spend lives that were already going to be lost, then so be it.”

“I... I don’t know what to say,” Elizabeth hesitated, taken aback by the sheer coldness with which the man spoke of that. Irwyn was not much better off. The major spoke of sacrifice and certain death with the tone he would ask for a cup of tea.

“A good word to the post-mortem promotion board would be appreciated,” the man finally broke the poker face, only to chuckle rather than flinch. “I have duty to fulfill today. If it is death, I will embrace it.”

“Thank you major,” Elizabeth settled on after a few seconds. “Try to keep your company alive as long as you can. If you get us through, we can look for help.”

“The city might be a bit too big for that,” the man sighed. “But I will try. You should get ready. I am not sure how much of an opening can even be bought.”

Irwyn glanced at the man and saw not a hint of hesitation. No fear. Irwyn stared at the approaching horde and had to admit he felt some trepidation himself and he had just been given a possible way out. They were close enough now that he could see that the thick crowd had no mere zombies in it. There must have been a dozen flesh hulks coming from just that one direction and then other undead. Most were definitely not humanoid but Irwyn could not quite recognize what they were at the distance – it was just the hulks were so large and distinct.

Those were certainly not weak variants though. And there were so *many*. He could already hear the distant beat of the steps, the low screeches and groans of muscle grafted where it should not be. The quiet humming and baited breaths of terrified soldiers.

Then he frowned... *Humming?* No. It was more like a distant song. Words just barely too far away to make out with a melancholic quiet melody.

"Is it just me..." Irwyn asked out loud. "Or do I hear singing?"