

Her Grace, the magnificent and stupendous Princess Bob, woke up to a pair of needy assholes. Arthur was fed with one hand and Solfis charged with the other. The golem wanted his core as loaded as possible in preparation for a possible confrontation as his combat mode apparently consumed a lot of energy. Arthur just wanted to grow. Probably.

At least her shoulder was fine. A quick inspection showed that the wound she could see was already close, if still a bit red. That was nice. The skinsuit looked like it was repairing itself as well.

Viv made another discovery while cleaning the litter. The soldiers had dug a small garden between the latrines and the walls and were growing vegetables. It stunk to high heaven, but it was alive and green. The presence of life was almost enough to bring a tear to her eye after so many days spent crossing landscapes of grey, black, and ochre.

She joined the knights for breakfast.

Conversation flowed more smoothly between herself and Benetti. For some reason, his Old Imperial had grown more polished in record time, and it made a world of difference. With the sleek knight as interpreter, she managed to keep the conversation alive with Cernit as well. Jor only answered in grunts and monosyllabic words.

The first question she had, Benetti volunteered. Knights were tasked with patrolling the deadlands, as the sole owners of mounts, as well as the still-expensive mana-blocker armors. However, only Jor's horse had survived the encounter of the day before and patrols were a mandatory three, for safety. They would not get out anymore.

Then came the time-honored tradition of the oral resume, where one lists their achievements in one minute to a group of people they just met, hoping to pass muster. Viv decided to go for honest yet vague. She was the daughter of a political figure, but had started working for the army until the fateful accident that teleported her so far away from her home.

The immediate reaction from Cernit was to ask her why she had not studied magic before. Apparently, her beginner status was clear to all. Casting was so useful that no one in their right mind would neglect their gifts.

She deflected the question by telling them that magic was restricted where she lived, which was technically true. The others showed understanding, meaning that there were probably nations that controlled their mages around.

The knights introduced themselves in turn. First, Benetti stood and bowed, using a sarcastic voice and exaggerated motion to carry his message.

“Ir Leias Benetti, previously heir to the Benetti title.”

The man had been banished from his family after an unspecified event left him disgraced. He did not share, and Viv did not pry. He had left with his family blade as a reminder of his lost past, and joined the Baranese army where his path and training led him to the role of knight. None of the three had met before being 'volunteered' to the deadlands, but as far as she could tell, it was not usually that dangerous an assignment.

Cernit was next. The solid lieutenant passed heavy hands through his salt and pepper hair, trying to see if his eager subordinate stuck to the script. Benetti introduced him as the last child of a minor noble family, practically just peasants and hunters themselves. He had risen through the ranks through skill and dedication, and had been promoted after one of Baran's many skirmishes with its numerous neighbours. His sword was a gift from the kingdom for years of effective service.

As for Jor, Benetti had little to say, as it was notoriously difficult to pry information from the laconical man. They only knew that he had been promoted from the heavy infantry after a heroic act, and that he was the son of some village's headsman.

The introductions done, Viv tried to understand them a little more and they were only too happy to oblige.

"We are knights not because of our path, but because we swore allegiance to the king, his majesty, Erezak the Third," Benetti explains with limited excitement.

"Also path must ride," Cernit added.

"What he means is that our path must include mounted combat."

"How do they know if your path includes mounted combat?" Viv asked.

"We fight on horseback," Benetti replied with a laugh. "If no path, then obvious as nose in middle of face!"

"Like you is tamer," Cernit said.

Huh?

"Knights are very strong. Backbone of army. But three knights are not the same."

"We do not have our heavier armor."

"And no captain for better charges."

Viv imagined that some path would be more of a support role, empowering the other soldiers. A magical power multiplier. She wondered what it meant for the conduct of warfare on Nyil. That, and people lobbing huge spells around. That should definitely be a game changer.

“So, once you are a knight, then what?”

They looked at each other with some confusion.

“We stay knights until we die. Serve Baran.”

She must have made a face, because Benetti explained more with a laugh.

“We have homes and families, of course. We can become higher. If we have strong path!”

Ah yes, people here stayed sturdy and healthy until they were very old. She had to remember that if someone looked like a grandpa and still wore heavy armor, he could probably punch her head off.

She only managed to ask a few more questions before the knights had to leave to attend their duties. Apparently, losing horses was a big deal and they had to write a report, but so was killing a necromancer. Even the tired soldiers displayed signs of merriment. That meant that they only looked slightly less brain-dead than usual.

Viv had her first free day.

First order of business: magic. She returned to her room and practiced for twenty minutes before realizing that she was out of juice.

“Solfis, why does it feel like I am out of mana?”

//You are out of mana.

“Fine. Then why am I out of mana?”

//You have stayed inside the fort, where black mana is minimal.

//Therefore, you did not fill your conduits and core.

“Are you saying that in order to be able to cast, I need to expose myself?”

//Using... ‘Yoink’ would also work when the target is strong enough.

//Otherwise, only moderately so, Your Grace.

//At least until you learn how to draw energy in your core from a normal environment.

//This unit estimates that you have 91% chance of avoiding long-term damage by charging outside.

“That’s kind of bad.”

//It is a much higher success rate than your... other endeavors.

“Like survival?”

//Perhaps.

Dammit.

Viv went outside and sat herself on the crenelations facing east, where Fort Sky used to be. She could feel the thicker mana here like feverish pinpricks against her skin. Her presence also meant that this part of the wall was no longer patrolled.

She spent her morning alternating between training there, training back in her room, and playing with Arthur. It was hard work and casting was amusing, but she was getting bored. Even adding a physical training routine to the mix failed to distract her.

Like that, she spent five days, with the knights getting closer in the work acquaintance sort of way. Her experience begged terrible questions, one she had not anticipated at all.

How could one grow so fucking bored in a magical world with dragons?

In fact, how could taking care of said dragons be reduced to cleaning shit and preventing her room’s furniture from being reduced to saliva-soaked kindling?

How could said dragons manage to use the very wind instinctively to stay afloat while her own powers were limited to stinky undead disposal and looking edgy?

Why did heroic knights smell like dead skunks?

Why did the ENTIRE FUCKING FORT SMELL LIKE SHIT ALL THE FUCKING TIME JESUS IT WAS PESTILENTIAL.

Thus mulling her dire circumstances and the inevitable heat death of the universe while glaring dreamily towards the east, Viv was in a prime spot to see something change in the dreary grey world of the deadlands.

“What the fuck is that?”

‘That’ was a black spot, an undulating mark far on the horizon. It was barely larger than a gnat for now, but she thought it might not stay that way.

She jumped down to fetch Cernit, and when the officer spotted the spot, so to speak, his expression grew grim.

Nothing happened that night and when she returned on the morrow, the spot had grown. It was still only a distant mark by then. Cernit brought out a brass tube that looked suspiciously like a telescope and handed it to her. She grabbed the contraption, brought it to her eye and saw only darkness.

Cernit pointed at the mana intake. She pushed some power into it and it suddenly worked.

The dot was a horde.

Now, she had seen masses of people at political events before. Such gatherings often gained a life of their own. Each individual might be vastly different from one group to another, but when the mob started to march, physics replaced intellect and instinct replaced empathy. The mass approaching them was different still.

A dark circle of larger forms moved forward with purpose, attracting a bevy of reventants that glutted its surface, then they themselves were shed at the edge to eventually join the trail of the comet-shaped herd. The slower specimens were slowly shed by the advancing mass as it moved on. It was also aiming right at them.

She did not need Solfis to tell her the score. There was another necromancer. And they were heading right this way.

“Fuck.”

Viv handed the telescope back to Cernit who inspected the incoming force again.

In Viv's mind a thought occurred. There was one horse left. She knew how to ride. She could be gone before they were surrounded.

She dismissed the thought before it could completely form. Pride held her back. Pride, and greed. She could not leave without Solfis and she would be at a severe disadvantage without him. His knowledge of paths and magic was too good to pass.

They would face the horde and hold it back. She hoped. The tall walls and soldiers should make a difference.

Cernit was done with his inspection. He turned around and left her alone on the battlements. A moment later, the fire on top of the tower was lit and a great black plume rose into the still air. The gesture was as solemn as it was pointless. No one would come to relieve them. Even the knights knew it.

Viv sat over the edge and extended a hand. A ball slowly formed until it was mostly circular.

Mana manipulation: Beginner 9

She would need all the edge she could get.

Days went on, slow and anxiolytic. There was little to do except train and occasionally take care of Arthur. Even the small dragon felt the change in the air, looking out to the approaching mass between bouts of flying practice. She and the others were suffering from cabin fever and the stress of an imminent attack at the same time. She only managed to buy them some respite by playing fourth in a card game Cernit had introduced. Even then, tensions were running high.

Hern, the bald man, had made a reappearance. His face still bore the traces of Arthur's attack on his scarred face, and she surmised that he spread rumors behind her back, for the soldiers grew distant again. Even the medic.

On the dawn of the tenth day, the horde arrived. And it was not a moment too soon.

Fort Sky stood on top of a small circular mound, with a single road snaking its way up to the fortified entrance. The walls and cliff on every other side were sheer and vertiginous, and so Cernit concentrated most of his forces forward where, Viv supposed, most of the action would take place.

From up close, the horde was a fascinating phenomenon. A circular concentration of gut spillers, crawlers and beasts held the center, while a ring of fresher revenants surrounded it on all sides with gaunt, caped figures placed at regular intervals. Around those, the milling rabble orbitated like an ocean of moaning flesh and rotten bones. Viv could not spot a single human being in that unholy mess.

Cernit had a last look from the top of the battlements, then he gathered everyone but a few lookouts in the inner courtyard. He gave her the place of honor at his right side.

They were a sorry lot. Barely a dozen soldiers and three knights, two magic weapons or three if you included her dagger. Their only source of fire took ages to work and doubled as cooking implement. If Cernit shared her thoughts, he betrayed none of it. His voice sounded throughout the open space with grim determination.

“Defenders of Baran, we are facing the gravest ordeal of our life. You know what stands outside and you know what they can do, what they will do, if they leave the deadlands. We have fulfilled our sacred duty in warning the royal army. Now, we will fulfill the other one: to stand and fight in the name of our king!” Veneti translated.

The soldiers were already standing straighter. Viv was a little bit impressed.

“Do not falter and do not shy. Protect your brothers-in-arms. Watch each other’s backs. It may be that we all fall today, but we will certainly take as many of them as we can with us. And if there is one chance for us to win, and for some of us to see our families again, I promise you that I will find it. Now, to the walls! Let none pass! For Baran!” he finished.

“For the king!” the small crowd bellowed.

Aw, it was like all those heroic movies where they all die at the end.

Fuck.

Viv shadowed Cernit as he climbed back up and settled down to wait with many people praying to one deity or the other. They did not have to do so for very long.

The core halted three hundred meters away and the horde continued on its course through sheer inertia. Hundreds upon hundreds of forms walked up the road at an irritatingly sedate pace. Viv thought they should be faster. Instead, they stumbled their way forth like piss-drunk cretins. Deadly piss-drunk cretins. It was infuriating.

By her side, Veneti forgot their size difference before the intimidating spectacle. He leaned to the side and whispered into her side boob.

“Wait for big one. No spell.”

“Yeah yeah.”

She had heard him the first four times.

It took another five minutes for the first body to bump against the wall, then another came close and climbed the first one. They stumbled. More and more bodies piled up as more revenants arrived to form a line of flesh ramps. On the wall, the silence was complete.

The first revenant ladder reached half the size of the wall. As more bodies piled up, it teetered to the side. Then, slowly, a portion slid left over the edge of the road. The rain of bodies led to a chain reaction that sent over fifty revenant tumbling onto the plain below, including the tallest mound.

They ended up in a squirming pile. Cernit made a gesture and a few soldiers dropped their fire-starting bricks on top of it. Like that, at least half of those would be destroyed before they could untangle themselves.

Viv had never seen such display of incompetence.

“Necromancer early on their path. Cannot control so many. But countless dead, much power. Such are the deadlands,” Veneti whispered.

It would be a fucking disgrace to be killed by a buffoon like that. She got what Solfis said about necromancy being an inferior path, in the long term. It was small comfort now that she was in the magical equivalent of a zombie apocalypse.

“How do people kill necromancers? Normally,” she asked.

“Heavy cavalry charge. Otherwise, same as all casters. You send another caster or you send assassins. Maybe a very good archer,” Veneti casually replied.

“Do we have any of those?” she asked, already guessing the answer as Veneti looked up into her eyes. A fatalistic bend tainted his smile.

“We have you.”

Viv looked out towards the sea of dead. Solfis was almost done with his frame and claimed it would solve all her problems. She suddenly had doubts about their success. What could one creature achieve against so many?

Then, she remembered that she was in a world of magic. And that Solfis was hundreds of years old and now built from dragon bone. Surely, that counted for something.

Surely.

The dead started to pile again.

In the silence that followed, Viv recognized the ‘hurry up and wait’ aspect she had grown accustomed to in the army. Some operations went on for hours, but most of the firefights she had been on had lasted mere minutes. The battle had started fifteen minutes before. Her side had yet to move a muscle.

Eventually, the first rotten hand grabbed the edge of the first stone and a soldier moved. With economic motion, he used the crescent polearm to push the creature back as it tried to go over. It fell, to be replaced by more.

Three of the soldiers focused on that specific breach. They alternated strikes and rested in-between in a slow dance that minimized the energy spending. A new ramp eventually reached the wall and three more soldiers stepped up to block it. Cernit gave the order, and a few more flaming bricks were thrown over the wall.

And revenants grabbed them.

Viv watched with interest as select individuals took the incandescent objects in their dessicated hands, pulled them to their chest, and jumped off the road to a fiery demise. She could not see the blue glint indicating direct control, but she did not have to. The necromancer wanted the way in kept clear and they would not burn through the horde with impunity.

The foes kept coming. Viv kept waiting. The three knights were around her, on protection detail. It felt weird being part of a fire team again, so to speak. They also clearly knew what they were doing.

The battle reached a weird stalemate. She was... she had never been part of something so bizarre. Like a discount zombie apocalypse. Except, she was in the movie this time. A hand around her throat and her neck would shatter.

Up and down and forth and back the blades went. Both sides of the crescent were sharpened. Sometimes, a revenant managed to grab a polearm. When that happened, the soldier twisted the weapon and brought it back with a harvest of severed digits. They were well-trained.

The rising stench made Viv nauseous through her mask.

It went on for fucking hours.

Eventually, it happened. All the soldiers present were engaged when the necromancer made his move. Crawlers and a few of the cloaked figures with weird tentacles detached themselves from the core and made their way up the road. Their movements were jerky and weird, even more so than usual. They lacked their usual disturbing grace. It felt to Viv as if some invisible hand had been shoved up their asses to use them as sock puppet. She inspected the new type of foe.

[Puppeteer: a dangerous kind of undead. It connects its appendages to revenants and uses them as shock troops. Connected revenants have their abilities improved.]

Improved was putting it mildly. The creatures latched on the nearest specimens and the connected revenants went from shuffle to predatory stalk in a heartbeat. Crawlers opened the path, climbing the wall of flesh with their strange, simian gait. They were a second away from the edge. She could see the necromancer's mind in the blue shine of empty orbits.

"Now," Cernit spoke.

“Yoink!”

Her first, overcharged attack smashed into the first crawler and slapped away the presence there, thrashing it as much as she could. The beast fell and the others faltered, cut off from the one who had needled them on.

Viv let go.

Her high acuity allowed her to throw several ‘yoink’ spells in such quick succession that she had sent a new one before the last had pulled back. Her black spears landed on every crawler first, turning them into piles of bones. The puppeteers were next and they died with high-pitched shrieks. Black mana sung through her conduits, as thick and syrupy as melted chocolate. It was a good kind of pain.

Cernit gave an order and all the soldiers grabbed a brick from their belt to send the ignited projectiles over the wall. Columns of smoke started to emerge here and there where flesh was the driest and densest. She knew that they would keep burning for hours.

She kept casting. The necromancer tried to regain control of the few special dead left, only to be blasted away a second time.

In less than fifteen seconds, a dozen high-value undead had been wiped out and the offensive had stuttered to a halt. The three knights moved on, hacking and slashing at the closest undead until the ramps collapsed into a mess of intertwined flesh. Smoke soon obscured the view of the valley below.

“What is happening?” a soldier with a scar on his chin asked.

“Silence,” Cernit answered, frowning. He was peering forward as well.

Cernit asked something of Benetti and the knight smiled and extended his hand. A gentle breeze soon rose, pushing away the ashes.

Below them, the revenants were trickling away. The day was won, but the battle had just begun, and they had already revealed their ace.