

It had been just a hum at first. Elizabeth as well as the quickly gathering officers stared at Irwyn in incomprehension for a couple of seconds.

"I hear it too," Elizabeth frowned then. And it grew louder. Slowly but surely. With each passing second it was becoming less of a background noise and more of an audible sound. As the soldiers were preparing fortifications and the mages readied themselves for the Desperado, as they called it, more and more people heard it. A deep tune that seemed to almost echo. And the pattern was obvious. Those more sensitive to magic heard it first and heard it more distinctly. Whether it was a good or a bad thing, Irwyn couldn't really tell yet. The undead were still approaching though and they would soon be within reasonable range of fire. Instead, they stopped. Just outside where most of the company's mages would be able to give an effective barrage. Not that it would make that much of a difference given the arrangement of greater undead that were resistant to weaker magics. Nonetheless, they did not engage. Irwyn looked across the horde and spotted many abominations he recognized. Several flesh hulks coming from each direction; the assassins with fake invisibility; behemoths of bone and sinew they had run into on their way there; and others he mostly did not know.

The song, however, was growing louder still. Then another joined it - a heroic orchestral piece with perhaps hundreds of instruments directed to perfection. Two different songs played at once... yet each was distinct. Like Irwyn's ears were perceiving them separately and then had no trouble parsing them apart. A third started just a moment later - a calm and joyful melody - and that strange effect remained. They were also each rather loud now.

That was the moment the undead finally attacked. They did not screech or snarl at them. The horde of engineered death bringers made only the thumps of stomping feet as it rushed at them. It was a *disturbing* sight - made it clear that the constructs existed for the singular purpose of erasing all life they could stumble upon. Yet despite that, Irwyn felt all fear drain from him. His back straightened and he faced them without a shred of doubt or trepidation.

A fourth song rang - a stimulating instrumental symphony - and Irwyn felt a surge of *clarity*. A continuous moment of clairvoyance where he felt his mind expand. Not just his focus but his perception. His understanding of those around him. It was comprehensive. More than even just the cognition enhancement magic that he under Dervish's advisement always maintained nowadays. It was perhaps significantly less potent in pure percentages, however, the song's effect remained wondrous.

"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**"

Irwyn chanted and it was *easier* than before. Not just because he had a better understanding of the spell but because he had simply become better. If perhaps only temporarily. The ray of the spell shot off, targeting the side most hulk coming from the northern side of the intersection. Among the storm of magic, it was lost and not intercepted, slipping by the undead defenses. It burned itself into the creature's mockery of a skin and this time Irwyn needed no prompt to form the **WEEPING** mark. It was too far away for Irwyn to hear its ethereal screech of pain but it died quickly. Perhaps a full second faster than the first time Irwyn had used the spell.

But more than that, Irwyn tried something else: As the flesh hulk fell over truly dead, Irwyn redirected the spell to target the next closest one. It took a massive chunk of mana from his Vessel, even more than the spell had cost to cast in the first place and took up a bit more focus from him for the moment he was extracting the brand from the first victim, however, Irwyn could

afford to spend far more magic than, supposedly, any mage around his level of power. This was an efficient way to do so.

Irwyn noticed the sixth song had started playing at some point. It was a slow dirge... almost burial. And as far as he could see the mass of undead started stumbling. Not necessarily slowing down, rather, they suddenly began to trip over one another. Irwyn had never seen anything above a mere zombie do that. Even the most lesser ghouls had maintained eerie supernatural coordination with each other. And it was a known fact that undead could instantly communicate with their fellow abominations over short to medium distances, perfectly syncing up with each other. Irwyn's best guess was that the song had disrupted that.

And that, along with the enhancements given by the previous songs, solidified that whoever was causing them was friendly. And since they were not part of their company, they were reinforcements.

As if on cue Irwyn felt something attack the undead coming from the North and West from behind. The air was already saturated with mana so whatever he had felt must have packed a lot of it. Or it was a lot of smaller spells. He couldn't quite tell. Either way, their situation had turned from a Desperado to a real battle. He wasn't sure how many allies had come but they wouldn't have engaged if it was completely hopeless. The direction they needed to go was clear though: Clear the pincer'd undead in the two directions and then see whether the company should attempt to wipe out the rest or flee with their new help.

The confusion that had enveloped the undead was showing its efficiency as well, earning much valuable time. Irwyn had managed to kill two more greater undead with his mark before they were upon them; a disgustingly porous humanoid-ish creature and a giant wolf-like creation, except without any fur.

That was when the undead began to return fire. It was, surprisingly, not a storm of spells. Instead, most of the oncoming barrage were other undead. There were the chunks of spellcasting meat that the flesh hulks were so keen on but also other similar creations. One of them though, was larger and flew with more momentum than all the others around it.

Irwyn tried to redirect his spell towards it though it flew overhead *fast*. Faster than should probably be possible from just a physical throw, which, obviously, meant some kind of magic. It looked like an uneven white ball, probably created from bones. Until, upon second look, Irwyn realised that its entire body was completely covered in ivory blades. Down to even the smallest gap. Irwyn could see *nothing* else than tightly packed edges.

### **"...Fated for failure"**

Irwyn caught the end of a chant course through the air. He had no idea where it had come from and had not heard a single word of the preceding chant. Neither could Irwyn feel what the spell had done in any way. The moment after it though, the undead ball of blades finally did something:

It exploded. Its thousand sharp bones a flurry of death raining upon the soldiers at a speed the eye could not perceive. There had been enough of the bone shrapnel to hit their whole formation.

Except not a single piece of bone had collided with Irwyn's barrier. Surprised, he glanced around only to see countless confused soldiers, some still in the middle of flinching from the unavoidable attack. What he did not behold was even a *single person* actually wounded by it. Staring at the ground, Irwyn found countless gashes where the bone had gone through concrete without shattering or getting stopped before sinking deep into it. Those would not have even slowed down when cutting through human flesh or some of the weaker mage's defences.

Impossibly, not a single one had connected with a target. With a blatant disregard for probability, every single piece had missed.

As if though to mock them for celebrating too quickly, six more nigh identical undead were already flying towards them, following the first. Irwyn hoped that the spell which had just saved them was still in effect - because otherwise there would be very few survivors - but still reinforced his shield before they could explode.

Their miraculous luck held. The concrete ground was now closer to gravel but the spell, whoever had cast it, had prevented a complete disaster. Irwyn spared a quick glance to see that indeed, there were no immediately obvious people hit by the storm of bone and returned his attention to the undead still running towards them.

On one hand, they no longer looked quite as endless. Irwyn could see small gaps between their numbers now, meaning there were only a few rows left. They couldn't have killed *that* many, which meant it couldn't have been too big of a number to begin with. It was still an immensely relieving thing to see.

On the other hand, they were *much* closer. A squad of Time mages, surrounded by regulars with enchanted shields, was currently maintaining a wall of twisted space that made it impassable in the North. In the East they had made a pit. In the West it was a wall of solid conjured rock. South... Irwyn couldn't tell what had been done in the South thought presumably something.

Either way, all of those fortifications held about a second before the undead shredded them with their own magics. Their loss of coordination made itself clear there as well though. It was more than just them struggling to communicate with one another. They were also casting a *lot* less. And Irwyn realized why:

The flesh hulks, for example, did not actually possess any capacity for magic on their own. Rather, they had a whole collection of corrupted souls taken from mages who could which the hulk then puppeteered to cast magic for it. Without them, it would not be able to access all that mana nor all the affinities.

Coordination was difficult when communication became impossible, seemingly even inside a single 'body'. Many other undead worked on the same principle as well. The effect of that particular song was even far more powerful than Irwyn had guessed.

Another barrage flew overhead and Irwyn did not sit idly this time. He focused on intercepting the projectiles and thrown abominations rather than risk disrupting the increasingly concentrated barrages of Void magic employed against the main groups. His brand was already in the air so he just had to direct it towards the nearest thing that seemed to present a threat: Another one of the uncannily *porous* humanoid creations - he was really not eager to find out what those did. And while it died he could also shoot down as many of the less threatening attacks.

Irwyn turned around just in time to see some of the undead making it through their front lines. Most had been held back through sheer concentrated offensive might for the moment, however, the mages trying to uphold the Eastern part of the defense had failed. The entirety of that horde was now pouring out of the bottleneck that the street was.

Among them was *just* a skeleton. In the swarm of undead it could be overlooked. *Had* been overlooked. It had looked fragile, just a hanger-on almost out of place in the company of greater undead.

And yet it blurred forward with unbelievable speed. It had been so far away the moment before yet the split second Irwyn had spotted it, the skeleton was standing in front of him before he could even realize something was happening.

The combat reflexes he had trained kicked in, having Irwyn almost subconsciously manifest a small barrage of weak Starfire spears – which did absolutely nothing - while he immediately redirected his still ongoing Starbrand towards the skeleton.

The same undead that struck his barrier with the digits of its hand and tore open a chunk of it without so much as slowing down. It did not *break* the barrier. It was much like the worms which had ambushed Irwyn earlier in the day: It seemed to disperse magic around the tip of its talon-like fingers as it struck rather than create an opening with brute force.

Not that it made that much of a difference as the ivory arm sunk inside the barrier and tried to grasp at Irwyn. This up close Irwyn realized that the skeleton merely *looked* normal. Because every single millimeter of the arm's bone was covered in white script. Tiny symbols of a language Irwyn could not recognize, so miniature that from a distance they were invisible.

The realization did not help Irwyn dodge. It might have actually distracted him instead. Irwyn mended the barrier around the arm as he half jumped, half stumbled backwards. The skeleton just barely didn't manage to grab him, the digit instead tearing through his suit and sinking into his biceps, then it slid out with Irwyn's motion.

"Argh," Irwyn grunted as the wound *burned*. The blessing in disguise was that the claw-like endings were so sharp they did not *hook*. He had to thank Dervish for the sadistic training regiment involving a fair share of wounds and deep cuts as otherwise he probably would have lost focus. The Brand finally landed on the skeleton... and struggled to latch.

The surface area was far smaller than the previous targets and already covered in magical symbols. Irwyn hesitated for a moment before directing it towards the skeleton's head where hopefully the situation would be better. It used that moment of thinking to rip the arm out of the barrier trying to hold it in place, then also looked down at Irwyn, judging how to approach.

It ended up choosing running around and hitting Irwyn from the back. It was incredibly fast after all. But slower when going in a half circle rather than a straight line. That bought Irwyn a precious few moments to throw himself forward and not get nicked. He also expanded the barrier in the same motion so that he would be completely out of reach from every side while in the center. It would require more power and focus, though Irwyn was not exactly willing to be conservative in this amount of danger.

The skeleton dragged its arm out again after failing to score another hit. The Brand had followed it and Irwyn finally had a moment to properly aim it into the abomination's forehead. There was

resistance. A lot of resistance. Rather than just latching on like it had with the other undead something was stopping it from taking effect.

Rather desperate and unsure *why* it wasn't working, Irwyn chose to brute force a solution. This close he could pour more mana into the spell. A *lot* more mana than it should be able to even use. It was a 5 intention spell after all and those took ridiculous amounts of magic to properly saturate - far more than it needed to operate at full power. Driven by desperation, Irwyn still did so, focusing every iota of his being not keeping up the barrier on imprinting on the ivory scalp.

It must have taken several seconds before, finally, there was a metaphorical *crack*. The resistance broke and vanished allowing the **WEeping** mark to burn itself into the skeleton's skull. Irwyn opened his eyes despite not remembering closing them as he stared at what he had done. The source of the resistance became quite obvious: The Brand had not just placed itself over the existing inscriptions - they had been destroyed by overwhelming magical pressure.

Though there was no time to focus on that. The skeleton was currently halfway through literally *digging* a massive wound into the barrier. The protective magic was still actively recovering, the undead was just shredding it so fast with both its hands that a larger and larger opening was gradually appearing.

That is, until the Brand stunned it. For just a moment, it completely stopped moving - long enough for Irwyn to repair the already existing damage. He had expected it to perhaps let out an ethereal scream like the flesh hulks had in the past but it did not. In fact, it barely reacted at all. It slowly backed up a few steps and Irwyn noticed in its hollow eye sockets something unexpected.

A newfound hatred.

The undead all stared at the living with hatred. 'Until all is dust', the infamous quote said. An inherent fury that could only be sated by destroying everything living. Irwyn had seen that over and over to various degrees, glittering in their eyes like a message: That they would never stop. But this... the way the skeleton glared at Irwyn no longer felt like that generic thirst for extinction. It was, although Irwyn loathed to admit it, personal.

Then it went berserk.

It charged Irwyn with tripled zest and doubled strength. Its ivory form slammed into the barrier at speeds beyond mortal eyesight and *cracked* it. Then it jumped back and charged straight back in. Over and over and over and over. Irwyn could see nothing more than a blur, feel nothing more than the ever-repeating strikes into his protection.

It was, as far as he could tell, without any involvement of magic. It was all pure physical force that kept hitting. Irwyn could have somewhat understood that with the hulks - they were massive, heavy hunks of meat - but this was beyond ridiculous. Bypassed anything remotely adjacent to common sense even when taking magic into account.

Irwyn had no real benchmark how sturdy his barrier actually was but it could take 4 intention spells dedicated specifically to breaking through defences. If he had to bet he was pretty sure a building falling right on top of his head would not shatter it.

Yet the skeleton just.. Kept. Slamming. Into. It.

Faster and faster. Its soul was ablaze, burning with Starfire. Irwyn felt it, the Brand incinerating its very essence. It was dying, rapidly.

Still too slowly. Irwyn could not really reinforce the barrier without giving up on the spell doing said killing. That made it a lethal race against time. Deeper and deeper cracks appeared on the barrier, reapplied faster than Irwyn could fix them. Enlarged by repetition.

Irwyn realized the skeleton was about to get through about half a second in advance. It gave him exactly enough time to start dodging which probably saved his life.

It did not save his arm. Funny thing about sudden and extremely violent amputations: The victims might often see them before they felt them. Irwyn stared wide-eyed at where his elbow used to be. Not far above that spot his biceps now simply ended. Blood was just starting to gush out.

He stared, uncomprehending at the skeleton. By all means, it should have had the time to turn around and finish him off in that moment of pure flabbergasted panic Irwyn was undergoing... But it couldn't. Not anymore.

What had once been white ivory was now charred and greyed. The skeleton had been physically *slamming* its entire body into a barrier of Starfire. It had not gotten out of that unscathed. The thickly layered inscriptions were in utter disrepair as it tried, and failed, to turn towards Irwyn.

It was so close to burning out. Irwyn could feel it. Its body was perhaps greatly damaged but the soul... the soul was on the brink. It twitched and tried to turn but it could not. The crafted undying form no longer listened. Irwyn had no way of knowing but he imagined the last vestiges of the corrupted intellect finally shattering.

Then the terrifying skeleton crumbled like a puppet with its strings severed into a heap of bones.

Irwyn managed about half a sigh of relief before he remembered that he had not gotten through it unscathed. The pain and the true onset of panic hit him around the same time. He stared at his severed arm, screamed, fell over himself and fumbled at the same time.

Dervish had prepared him for pain but not for anything *close* to what he was feeling. It was overwhelming, all-consuming. The only thing that shone through was the sheer panic at losing a limb and leaking *so much* blood. It was no wonder that the combination of the two was more than his mind could handle, despite all the conditioning it had undergone.

Irwyn fainted.