

“The smell is becoming constant,” Irwyn frowned, he had kept his mask on, though Elizabeth ended up removing hers. They had gone down from the tenth to the fifth floor but even all the way up there he could smell the stench that was almost certainly associated with necromancy. It reminded him a bit of his last day in Ebon Respite, except much worse. At least it was no longer provoking any physical reaction. Whether that was him getting used to the putrid odor or just the intellectual awareness it was not really physical he wasn’t quite sure.

Either way, they would likely run into their first undead soon... and Irwyn wasn’t sure what to expect. He had fought what Old Crow had called weaker ghouls back in Ebon Respite and those could not pose a serious threat to him even when he had been an order of magnitude weaker. What put him on edge was that Elizabeth seemed *nervous*.

“Straight for three more intersections, then to the left,” Elizabeth said with a frown. They had tried following Dervish’s instructions, however, there have been... issues. Contacting the Ducal capital had gone without an issue; it was Abonisle itself that was a problem. All the magic sustaining easy city-wide communication had been shut down, followed by spells meant to jam it from being activated. The undead were most likely already attacking the city but Elizabeth could not call a full alarm or coordinate with the military presence within the walls. At least not remotely. The duo was headed towards the closest military facility at the moment which Elizabeth thought would likely have a solution.

“Dodge!” Elizabeth yelled out of a sudden; Irwyn did not hesitate as he got out of the way with a half-tumble. A globe of mangled flesh flew right by him a moment later. Irwyn looked over to the creature responsible for the throwing - one standing at least 50 meters away. It was a horrible amalgamation of writhing flesh that did not even *attempt* to look humanoid. The creature had no real legs as it moved by dragging its bulk over the ground with many small appendages – the bulk itself looking almost like a sack filled up to bursting, except made out of meat. There were two massive arms that literally ripped chunks out of itself to throw. And the eyes. It had so many eyes just sprinkled haphazardly all around.

It had also been a mistake to stare after dodging. Irwyn was completely ambushed by the projectile of meat and sklea *using magic*. It blasted him with, of all things, a beam of Light magic. Four intentions, meant to pierce his defenses and then maim. It was an exceedingly poor choice against him... but if Irwyn had been a Void mage it could have been lethal. Even if the horrid undead didn’t have enough intelligence to properly use its tools, whoever had created it clearly knew who most of its opponents would most likely be.

“It has Light magic,” Irwyn warned as he sent flames to burn the ball of flesh behind him to ash - he felt *something* try to leave it and burned it as well just in case. The creature in the distance stopped and seemingly... accessed the situation after seeing Irwyn survive. “Four intentions in the spell.

“A flesh hulk,” Elizabeth nodded warily, clearly aware of what they faced. “Low intelligence, high power and versatility. An assembled undead - in other words, the kind that doesn’t appear naturally. It can corrupt the souls of its victims and use them as sources of magic. It also gathers bulk by devouring flesh. We need to destroy the core soul controlling it; also make sure to destroy any corrupted souls it throws at us before they can be recalled.”

“I don’t exactly know how to do that,” Irwyn grimaced.

“*Burn* or *destroy* should be plenty,” she replied. “Souls are vulnerable without a physical Vessel. I felt you got the last one.”

“That was a soul?” Irwyn frowned. “I have never felt anything like that when people died around me.”

“A corrupted one forcefully staying formed instead of dispersing,” Elizabeth shook her head, though she kept staring at the thing in the distance. It was starting to move again. “You are sensing the magic keeping it together at all. Get ready, it’s coming for us and there might be more.”

And indeed. The flesh hulk did not throw another piece of itself at them, instead, it charged. Kind of. It’s appendages would not allow it to move particularly fast but it had a workaround: Hooks of conjured rock appeared around it and sunk deep into the undead’s flesh, hefting it up while leaving ugly wounds. Not that it bled or cared, being suddenly carried forward at significant speed.

“**Burn,**” Irwyn sent a wave of Starfire forward, preparing to dodge out of the way. He held little back, imbuing it with four offensive intentions. A meager barrier arose to try and block it. It resisted for maybe half a second and then crumbled, leaving the hulk to charge *right* into it as it tried to fly through. Normal meat would have turned to ash in an instant, even at that size. This creature did not. Irwyn was ready for that much at least as he made the spell follow, hoping it was doing damage at all. It seemed to have some kind of resistance to magic, though the details were beyond him.

That casting meant he was focused on the hulk, though. As a consequence of that he did not notice the rain of void magic until it was almost upon him. It did not come from the hulk, after all. It struck him from a group of hooded figures scattered across the windows of several nearby buildings; all of them more than likely undead mages. Most of them carried at most two or three intentions, however, there were well over a hundred and all of them were *Void*. Very effective at destroying his barrier of Starfire. Making use of his focus on the enemy in front of him to launch an ambush

Even though Irwyn had not noticed it until the last moment due to the ambient mana and all the other spells going off all around, Elizabeth had. A sheet-thin wall of pitch-black magic rose from the side to take on the barrage. It being concentrated in both timing and direction actually made it easier to block for her. In the same element, the attack barely dented even her more hastily prepared defenses.

“I will take care of them,” she quickly said. “You burn away the hulk,” then she moved past him and made steps of her void magic to close the height difference, already engaging with projectiles of her own. Irwyn was not particularly worried. Just like he did not burn to flame, Elizabeth was also highly resistant to Flame and the Void due to her exceptional affinities. It might not rise to the same level as Irwyn’s, however, it gave her an insurmountable advantage when fighting against lesser Void mages, no matter their numbers. Therefore, he refocused on the hulk. In the time of his distraction it had retreated back out of his *burning* spell. It was singed and mutilated with burns deep enough that they would reach bones and incapacitate anything living through sheer pain. This thing seemed barely bothered. The hook of conjured rock in it’s flesh readjusted to reach deep again - some had been loosened by the meat beneath them being incinerated - and it seemed prepared to move again.

Irwyn’s spell was still ongoing so he sent it to the collision course. It tried to avoid with impressive agility, however, it still had weight and bulk. Meaning that unlike Irwyn’s spell it had to work against its own physical momentum to maneuver. It immediately became clear that it had no chance of getting past the moving cluster of flames or outrunning it for more than a few

seconds. It raised two of its arms again and Irwyn thought it was planning to throw another ball of flesh at him.

Instead he felt it start to teleport.

The spot it chose was right behind him. Irwyn tried to disrupt it with a burst of light filled with *disruption, fortification, stabilization* and *repulsion*, four concepts he was sure worked to stop teleportation, however, it was not enough. The Time/Space magic writhed and it *was* slowed, made more difficult. It bought Irwyn enough time to turn around and start preparing for a close range spell. It nonetheless was able to finish.

When the hulk emerged the real toll of Irwyn's disruption attempts became immediately apparent. *Huge* chunks had been torn out of it by some kind of spacial turbulence. Parts were shredded and stretched in a seemingly haphazard way, deep gashes and mutilations so brutal they were clearly visible even on the already burned and wounded surface. Any mortal being who had gone through that would have died on the spot. The hulk did not even slow down.

The split second it reappeared it was already bringing the two arms facing Irwyn down. With unnatural, probably spell-woven, speed and force it struck. The barrier of solid Starfire stopped the strike. What it did not completely block was the physical shockwave that managed to pass through it, making Irwyn stumble. Before he even recovered from that those arms were already in the air and coming down again and not just that. Void magic began to pepper him from point blank.

There was no running away, Irwyn lacked the mobility to escape. Therefore, he had to stand his ground. "**Burn,**" he spoke again summoning a new conflagration of Starfire while letting the old one fade. *Burn, incinerate, conflagrate, scorch* and *cremate*. Given the situation he decided to commit with 5 intentions. Along with his four-intention shield that left limited focus for other magics which he spent on easy beams of light imbued to *destroy*. He did not even attempt to target the hulk though, give how resistant to magic it clearly was. Rather, he targeted any Void magic it was summoning and didn't end up being immediately swallowed by his larger burning spell.

The undead kept swinging. Once, twice, thrice... Irwyn was being shaken by the sheer physical impacts somehow making it through the barrier, though quite likely muted. He had no benchmark for how much his barrier could bear, however, the strength behind the blows had to be *ridiculous*. Slight cracks appeared for a split second after each before mending.

But it *was* burning. The drain on Irwyn's Vessel was significant, however, that was fine. He had yet to discover the actual limits of his Reservoir and his body recovered anything spent quite quickly.

And the thing's flesh did not recover. By the 10th blow, the hammering grew weaker. By the 15th only one of the hands was still able to strike and only did so weakly. The strikes never reached 20 as Irwyn watched the flesh hulk collapse onto itself, incinerated pieces of meat no longer able to hold up the bulk above them.

From there it took only a few more seconds. Irwyn tried to concentrate somewhere roughly in the center to look for whatever corrupted soul was the core of it. The abomination still kept casting spells at Irwyn in an endless barrage but their power was irrelevant; though Irwyn did keep looking out for any surprisingly strong final attacks. But nothing of the sort came.

Irwyn felt something *crunch* inside the hulk, releasing a surge of foul magic. The same moment the extremely resilient flesh became *much* less resistant, the rest of it burning away in instants.

Soon enough there was nothing left on the ground in front of him than his flames and dispersing ash.

Then, just as Irwyn was about to dismiss the flames to make sure nothing hid in them, said hiding things *jumped* out.

Maggots. Little flesh worms launched themselves out of the flames; how they had survived them Irwyn did not know. They were small but *leapt* so fast Irwyn was not quite able to react. Neither was Elizabeth who was just returning from having dealt with the ghoulish mages.

They little worms reached Irwyn's barrier and *bit* into it. There were dozens of them and most utterly failed, however, inexplicably, a few made it though. They *devoured* the magic itself, with gnawing bites tore chunks out. Then they were through.

Not many, just a few. Irwyn was still reeling from the ambush itself though and this put him even further on the backfoot. Thankfully, the barrier had at least slowed them down and Irwyn, half reflexively, attacked with *piercing* and *destructive* beams of Starfire. Though the maggots had survived being burned, the piercing attacks proved effective at killing them.

Unfortunately, that seemed to have been the intention.

As the magic struck them they *exploded* into white mist. Still off balance, Irwyn breathed it in as the bulk of it flew right into his face. It immediately began to - metaphorically - burn his eyes with irritation as well as his throat, starting to choke him. It was only extra shocking because it *burned* Irwyn. It was an awful time to realize that his seeming immunity to burning applied only to heat and such but not to whatever this was.

"Burn yourself, the whole body!" Elizabeth shouted before Irwyn could recover from the shock, her voice raised with urgency. "It's poison! Burn it out from within!"

And Irwyn did when a moment later his mind caught up with her. He conjured starfire and forced it down his throat and over his face. Into his lungs and a good way towards the stomach. He did not burn, though he did choke. Not to mention it made breathing *very* difficult.

"What was that?!" Irwyn wheezed. His emergency treatment also left him with horrifically dry throat.

"I... I don't know," Elizabeth admitted, approaching Irwyn worriedly, "Are you alright?"

"Not great but not dying," he said then coughed, looking down at the collar of his nice suit. Parts of it had been burned off to get rid of the poison or whatever it actually was. "You seemed to have recognised the poison though?"

"It obviously had to be poisonous or corrosive, otherwise what would be the point?" she sighed. "Irwyn, I am no senior inquisitor. I was a newborn in the last Lich war, all I know is from books and lectures. But those always talk about the most common ones. The types and general forms that most necromancers default to because they have a perfect balance of efficiency and power. But the Enemy is cunning... They can learn, innovate and experiment," she looked down at where the hulk had been burned to dispersing ash. "Make changes and modifications. Predict mortal nature and use our expectations against us at times."

"I certainly did not see that coming," Irwyn shuddered. "Do you have any clue what else we should prepare for?"

"In truth, we cannot know what horrors await us in the city. No one can," Elizabeth said slowly. "I could give you a lecture on the common tricks... but we don't have the time."

“Let us hurry then,” Irwyn nodded. “Lead the way.”

It became immediately apparent why they had encountered no lesser undead on the way. The military compound was already under siege when they arrived. Seemingly nothing quite as dangerous as the hulk they had run into but there were *numbers*. Hundreds upon hundreds of shambling undead swarmed towards it forcing the soldiers to defend or be overrun.

The worst part perhaps was the way those corpses looked: Torn and stained clothes, of course, but not old. Not decayed. Some of the undead were still *bleeding* from wounds that were no longer trying to seal; shedding drops of blood no longer pumped by a heart. For all he knew, they could still be warm.

“The recently dead are already being raised,” Irwyn spoke with distaste but also... distress. From how large of an area were the undead being funneled here? The casualty count could be above the average or perhaps even below. Thousands of dead here in less than the first half hour, that was terrible. A tragedy.

But this was such a *minuscule* segment of Abonisle. So small Irwyn could not even guess an accurate comparison to the whole but it had to be less than a thousandth of a thousandth. So, logically, when he scaled that up... the number was incomprehensible. Rather than think about it he hoped to be distracted with trying to resolve the situation.

“Most likely,” Elizabeth nodded. “Zombies, most of them. They don’t have proper soul, only fragments. It means they need to be puppeteered to do more than walk in a direction and clumsy claw at things. But there will be more dangerous undead in the crowd. Just waiting for someone to drop their guard.”

And eventually, someone would. The undead were not being uncontested. The soldiers had erected a parametre in around their compound. Unlike most buildings in the inner city of Abonisle, the facility was not touching any other construction, allowing for a long gap in all directions. Most likely precisely to allow for this kind of maneuvering.

They were switching between barrages. Not just magic but also mundane projectiles and explosives. They were not using rifles - those would clearly not be too useful against the undead - instead they had actual cannons. Relatively small ones, mobile on wheels. Small crews loaded them while other soldiers chucked either magic or other weaponry into the masses. Then when ready the cannon crew would get their fellows out of the way and fire into the crowd of the undead.

They shot shrapnel. Sharp pieces of metal propelled at a velocity where sinew and bone barely slowed them down. Entire groups of the zombies would turn into shredded heaps, obstructing the rest of the horde. There was a strange rhythm to it. How the soldiers switched in and out.

And their other weapons were clearly made for the task. Small thrown explosives took out the legs of anything near where they landed. It usually did not actually kill the undead - as far as breaking the magic could be considered killing them again - rather, it left them mostly incapacitated, able to only crawl forward until something took them out in the crossfire.

Large bottles of grease flew and shattered far away and the undead... slipped. Their mechanical and poorly controlled motions made them prone to falling prone. Vials of glue worked similarly. Slowing them down if not outright stopping them in place, and that obstructed the undead behind them.

That seemed to be the essence of the combat doctrine. Slow the horde down as much as possible to let the mages and the barrages of shrapnel take them out. And it seemed to be working reasonably fine. The issue was, they were still losing ground. Slowly but at still at an almost visible pace. Even with all that obstruction they could not destroy them faster than they came.

"We should help," Irwyn concluded. However, Elizabeth shook her head. They were hidden in a veil of Void magic once they got close enough. She was clearly attempting to save her stamina and mana, which made sense enough. They couldn't afford her actually wringing her Vessel dry.

"We have the element of surprise," she explained. "There is a reason the better mages have not acted yet. There should be at least a few here that could burn that whole crowd down in minutes if they invested the magic into it. Rather they are waiting. Waiting for the Enemy to make a mistake."

"So far the undead had been nothing but cunning and competent," Irwyn frowned.

"Yes, they can use our nature against us but we can do the same," she nodded. "You see, it is a known thing that every single undead hates the living with burning urgency. This goes beyond mere dislike. It is an urging hatred that cannot be silenced. Some suggest it might be the Betrayer itself whispering it into their ears. But whatever the case is, this causes a major weakness for them."

"They are impatient," Irwyn guessed, thinking of it as an impetus. The very reason driving them forwards. How *could* they resist its call?

"Most undead lack the discipline to disregard those emotions for the larger picture," she confirmed. "Rule of thumb is, anything weaker than a lich will almost always eventually come out if you stall the its raised minions long enough. Less often when they think it's suicidal but whatever is leading the assault clearly thinks it can win, otherwise they would be sending those zombies to multiply rather than run into the slaughter here.

"Look for that moment and ambush it," Irwyn nodded. "Simple enough."

"Now we just have to wait," Elizabeth nodded. "It shouldn't be much longer."