



Tress had lost half of her Royal Guard contingent, but the survivors had fallen into a confident groove and were at the precipice of victory, after learning to indiscriminately immolate any and all civilians they encountered. There was no room for mercy or careful consideration, given that such were easily exploited by the treacherous Daemon and its vile subversion. Because its evil black blood was weakest to fire, those of her units wielded the element were turned into the core of their tight-knit formations as they slowly pressed the remainder of the enthralled population of Rooskeld into a corner of the township.

“Any sightings of the red-haired one?” she asked Arn, who had taken charge of another unit after its leader’s death.

“He seems to yet elude us, Major.”

“That one is more dangerous than the rest, make sure to find him. Take another unit with you.”

As Arn left with ten other Guardsmen, Tress urged her remaining troops forward, sending them through the front and back of the three Noble family mansions where the Daemon seemed to have barricaded itself.

With her small unit, which encompassed two swordsmen, who wielded earth and ice respectively, and two flame sorcerers, she moved into the biggest of the mansions, opting to send a third flame sorcerer around the back with orders to begin setting fire to every other escape route, such that the creatures inside were forced to run through Tress’ group.

Casting a powerful gust of wind, she blew the front doors off their hinges, then produced a continuous barrier of dense air before herself and her subordinates, which had already, on several occasions, proven a solid strategy for dealing with the chain-reaction of the black blood spreading from enemy to ally.

Wordlessly, she directed the two elemental swordsmen to the wings of her advance and kept the flame sorcerers between them. As smoke started billowing from the back of the mansion, the exterior flame-caster doing his work, it did not take long for the enemy to manifest itself.

As seemed its wont by now, it started off with a manipulative charge of the youngest and most feeble of its puppets, which, to begin with, had thrown off the decision-making of her Guardsmen, but by now they were hardened to it.

Spears of ice and splinters of dense rock shot through the eighteen adolescents that came straight at them, and shortly thereafter the sorcerers set fire to the corpses, turning the black blood to steam and inert crystallised dust.

Another three charges came, before the house was deemed empty, but, as they were about to leave, having let their guard down for a moment, a *snap* sounded from behind them, and the ice swordsman was lanced through the torso with a spike of black blood. Acting purely on instinct, Major Tress sealed him in a cocoon of air, and one of the sorcerers set fire to it, immolating the poor Guard alive before he could become a black-eyed puppet. The earth swordsman erected a sloping barrier out of the marble floor and the other sorcerer lashed their attacker with tongues of fire, though seemingly not striking true.

“Foul Daemon!” Tress yelled. “Face us with all your might! Let’s have it over with now, unless you prefer we continue to dig you out of hiding for three more weeks, you spineless coward!”

“...I much prefer...this...I am amused...this way...” it replied, firing off another spike that pierced through the marble barrier, but veered off from hitting the other swordsman, thanks to Tress’ covering barrier of air.

By the side of the crimson-haired Undying stood a woman with a golden prosthetic that Tress had heard enough reports about in Helmsgarten to recognise as a Hemolatrix Witch. It chilled her to see even so powerful a sorceress be overcome by the Daemon and its vile touch. Before she could warn her men, the Witch launched forward in a deluge of stale blood orbiting her like moons and which fired through the air on incomprehensible arcs, before lancing through both of her sorcerers and killing them instantly, though not turning them to the Daemon’s control, to Tress’ surprise.

Tress fired off her own attacks in the form of cutting slashes of air, which, alongside her continuous barrier, began to take a toll on her body, rapidly leeching the warmth from her blood. For a few moments, her and the Witch, who was leaping around and trying to catch her off-guard with arcing blood-spikes through the air, were locked in a stalemate, both of them failing to finish off the other.

*Snap!*

The long-ranged shot from the Red-headed puppet flew through the air, tracing what seemed like a missing trajectory, until it hit Tress’ barrier of air and arcing sideways into the flank of her lone Guardsman, who, a second later, burst apart in a shower of tiny spikes of black blood. None of them hit Tress, but she was now forced into a corner, the Witch waiting for her to make a mistake, and the Daemon seeming to calculate how to hit her through her barrier by taking pot-shots and seeing how they veered off.

*I wish I had something akin to Nøgel’s power,* she mused and she slashed through the air, hitting the many blood-spikes the Witch sent her way and punching her off-course with buffets of air, as she continued to try to get in close and deal a finishing blow.

Tress’ body was shivering and when she lashed out to blow the Witch off-course during one of her leaps, nothing came of it and her continuous barrier faltered a second later.

She watched as the golden prosthetic was raised in the air and became coated in gold-flecked stagnant-purple blood that took the shape of a cleaver around the limb. It struck her just how emotionless the Witch’s face was, but, then again, her mind was no longer within.

*To die to a dead puppet... how unfortunate...*

Then time continued and *something* flew through the air, sending the Witch tumbling to the side, a colossal ice spike settled inside her skull, piercing from lower jaw and out through the top of her left temple. She stayed down, now dead for good.

The crimson-haired puppet halted its attack to look at its dead servant, then took a single step towards the Witch, before being skewered through sixteen times by spikes of ice and rock, tumbling to the floor of the mansion in pieces, which were moments later reduced to ash by a deluge of superheated fire.

Tress wavered on her feet, before collapsing under her own weight. A moment later, Arn stood above her, reaching out with his hand.

“About time,” she said with a smile and accepted his hand.

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Ciana and Heskell found Jakob talking to the Flower Lady in Hekkenfelt as they returned from their quest, the Brute dragging the corpse of the strange creature they had found to be the culprit of the many disappearing sheep.

The Flower Lady squealed and dropped the bundle in her hands as she saw the corpse they had brought with them. Jakob, however, seemed suddenly fascinated.

“Where did you find this?”

“In a nearby forest,” Ciana answered.

Heskell grunted affirmative.

“Did you find its lair?” he then asked, suddenly switching to the lilting tongue of demons.

“Lair? I didn’t think it would have one,” she replied sincerely.

“It’s one of Grandfather’s creations,” he explained. “He has a certain fondness for making creatures that imitate their constituent parts in terms of natural instincts. Given that what you have found seems to me a hybrid of a wolf and tarantula, it would most definitely have one.”

Heskell grunted something, which she did not know how to interpret.

The pretend-Alchemist did however seem to understand it and replied, “Don’t be apprehensive, Heskell. If we can find its lair, we can earn ourselves some goodwill with the Guild, and potentially find a lead on one of Grandfather’s old laboratories, from which this thing must surely have escaped.”

This time, she understood what the Brute grunted in reply. It was a warning. But Jakob simply brushed it off, then leant down to pick up bundle of lilies that the Flower Lady had dropped, handing them to her and continuing their conversation where they had left off. It was something to do with roots of a specific bush, but she had no knowledge of such things and did not truly comprehend the topic. Shakily, the Flower Lady continued her explanation, though she kept looking to the corpse of the monster.

The Guild Hall fell silent when they entered with the corpse of the wolf-head arachnid, or, rather, it was silent when they entered. There was only one Receptionist in, and those assembled looked less like adventurers and more like funerary mourners. Despite the dreary atmosphere however, their burden did arouse some attention, and the Receptionist faked a smile and told them good job on their quest, before announcing that they would be receiving their iron badges soon.

Ciana found that she had rather enjoyed herself, hunting down a local farm menace, and suddenly contemplated if she had perhaps wasted her many years alive on thinking she was an outcast of society, when her acceptance into Hekkenfelt and its Guild had happened so easily. Already, many of the locals greeted her when they walked to where the three of them were staying in a formerly-abandoned one-storey house.

They had just left the Guild Hall the following day, new iron badges in hand, when Jakob handed Ciana a murky vial of *something*.

“What’s this?” she asked, as they walked down through the main street, a new quest flier in hand.

“I am your support Alchemist,” Jakob replied. She was unsure whether he was being facetious or genuine. “As such, I have concocted a revitalising tonic that will aid you in battle.”

Ciana pulled the cork out and sniffed the brew: it was sweet and tangy. She wondered how it would taste, but doubted it was a good idea to try it now.

“I made it by mixing the ground-up roots of the *Alan’s Thorn* bush and a local variety of ginger with a honey-sweetened tea of maple leaves.”

“Have you tried it yourself?”

“Yes. I haven’t slept since I distilled it yesterday evening.”

“So it’s for fatigue.”

Jakob nodded. She managed to spot a slightly crazed look in his eyes below the lip of his hood, as well as the barely-perceptible way his body was trembling with unspent energy.

She lifted the vial into the air, letting the sunlight catch it, which turned the murky-brown into a glowing amber. “Does it have a name, this tonic?” she asked.

“I came up with it yesterday, so, no.”

“It needs a name,” she insisted.

“*Revitalising Tonic?*” he wondered.

“Too dull. How about: *Jakob’s Quick-you-up Brew?*”

Jakob simply shrugged, though Heskell grunted something that could arguably be considered mocking amusement.

“**No good at names.**”

She folded her arms, the bone carapace armour scraping against itself with a hollow sound. “If you’re so good, how about you name it?”

“**Lightning Blood.**”

Jakob halted in his step and Ciana struggled not to laugh. The two shared a glance. “He really got us, didn’t he?”

“You’re in charge of naming things now, Heskell,” Jakob demanded.

If not for the timid mask of the Brute, she was sure he would have flashed them a frown, as his resultant grunt sounded very put-off by the suggestion.