

## **When heroes make plans**

The town of Grendel, a stone's throw from the capital, was a town of mostly farmers and tradesmen. Nothing of import really ever happened here, save for the summer festival held every year for the goddess of harvest and occasional brawl.

The local blacksmith run by Alyssa and her sister Constance was renowned for their intricate blades and battle prowess, thought they'd never had to fight anything more than the odd traveler attempting to rip them off. The worst of which was a man named Crenn, who'd ordered a double edged, folded short sword with leather strapped hilt and maker's name carved into it. He'd taken the blade in hand and made the final mistake of pointing it at its maker, who responded by grabbing her own blade and opening the man's throat after what people said was the shortest fight ever.

The inn, run by Grimmaldi, was a typical inn from the outside. But once inside, the first thing most people noticed was Grimmaldi's giant maul which she had behind her counter. More impressive yet was the ogre skull hanging from the opposite wall with a distinct crack near the eye sockets, no doubt from her maul. Several stories existed about it, but none knew the truth. The most popular story said that Grimmaldi had been bathing in the pond to the west of town when the unlucky ogre happened upon her and took more than a quick glance before she jumped out, took up her maul and smashed the brute's head in.

The local library, run by a man named Bryan, was a typical library with books on spices, herbs and of course farming. But these books were hardly the most interesting thing in this library.

A local woman, named Webs, was quite small for her age and was in this library nearly every day.

The whole town was convinced she was autistic, as she never spoke to anyone, nor did anything noteworthy outside of reading a whole pile of books. What they did not know however was that they could not have been farther from the truth. Webs was 25 years old and, most notably, a witch. Not the kind of haggard old crone one might find in a swamp. But an attractive young woman, who knew how to dress as to stay off everyone's radar. She'd been taught by her mother how to use magic at the age of 16 and had been intrigued by its potential, but had promised her mother never to use it unless her life was in danger.

That promise turned out to be a tad more annoying than she'd ever anticipated, since the town remained safe for many years, but she practiced in the comfort of her own home when she could. Silently she hoped for a burglar to let her magic flow freely, but none ever came, much to her dismay.

So it was fair to say that even when the grey flood spread across the southern towns, they all had every reason to believe they'd be safe. Except, the grey flood had nothing to do with water, clouds or even fire. The grey flood was a large gathering of undead, commanded by the Lich Verlas, in an attempt to lay waste to the kingdoms of man. And so far, he was succeeding.

The people of Grendel had learnt of this threat to the south and felt confident that the Silent Blades and Talons were more than equipped to deal with the threat. They had been the elite warriors of the kingdom for hundreds of years, and had defeated even the red dragon of Tharik when left towns in ashes in its wake.

"So after a dragon, what could a measly army of undead do to them?" The people of Grendel often said, confident of their saviors' arrival.

Though even when the town of Arvis just down the road from them had fallen to the grey flood, the Silent Blades nor the Talons showed any sign of helping. Even the town's guards had begun to lose hope, despite the capital's few reinforcements.

They had sent 20 men from the capital's guards to reinforce the town of Grendel as a last defense before the grey flood would reach the capital itself. But those 20 men knew they'd been sent only to delay the inevitable, and talked regularly of death and the glorious defeat about to be suffered. Even going as far as to proclaim themselves the heroes, people would write and talk about for ages to come when the undead horde would finally be stopped.

Even so, the guards ordered any families with children to go to the capitol where they would stay. The children were important in case the town fell and they would need their parents alive, so they needed to go as well. Some men protested at first, but when faced with the stern look and shining blade of the guard's commander, they folded and followed their families.

It was roughly a week after the 20 men had arrived when the sky turned black and stung the flesh of the remaining men and women in Grendel with icy rain as a prelude to the light grey sea creeping in from the south.

At first it seemed like a massive, slithering, grey creature in the distance, crawling ever closer with its thousands upon thousands of legs. Each one moving in perfect sequence. But as it did, the individual faces of fallen men with empty black eyes stared at them with vicious determination as their legs seemed to carry them automatically toward the town. The flood had become an unending army of death with swords in hand, backed by the eerie pale blue glow of their Lich lord like a blue flame coming to cleanse the fields of the mess its army left behind.

Meanwhile, the guards stiffened as their commander told them what was expected and the villagers armed themselves in case their frightened guardsmen fell under the enemy numbers.

Alyssa, the local blacksmith, took up her freshly forged scimitar blade and her mother's armor, ready for battle. Her sister Constance, had gathered two short swords and leather armor from their stock and shouted across the village.

"Grimaldi! Are you going to keep that inn when the village burns? Or are you finally going to lift your fat ass and slam the undead when they come your way?"

"Constance, keep your tongue or I'll rip it from your crushed skull!" She shouted back.

"That's the spirit! Let's get this party started!"

The three women set up right behind the guards, ready to rip through the walking corpses headed their way, when suddenly a giggle sounded behind them.

As they turned around, they saw the innocent little woman they knew as Webs. They knew her as being a booklover and a very shy person in general. So to see her standing there with a dagger in her hand and a book strapped to her side, they didn't know how to react.

"Webs, you know this is going to be dangerous right?"

"I'm counting on it." She laughed.

Alyssa, Constance and Grimaldi stood still for a second, baffled by this innocent looking girl with her wide grin. Each of them wondered how this woman was going to take care of herself in battle, but something else grabbed their attention.

Where first there were the footfalls of thousands of undead, now there was silence and the undead simply stood there, staring at the humans in front of them.

For several minutes, it was as if time had been frozen to preserve this final moments of peace, and then with a thunderous roar the battle began. Walking corpses threw themselves at the guards and got cut down by the dozen, when finally the guards began to fall. Each of them screaming as they did.

Still thousands more waited with swords in hand, barreling down upon the small group of women who stood in a single line, backed up by the battle ready men and women in the village.

The closer they got, the louder the laughter from Webs, until finally the other women were sick of it.

"What are you laughing at, you disturbed hermit!?"

"The incompetence, the finality of it, and most of all the wonderful release."

"What are you talking about?" Constance and Grimmaldi asked simultaneously.

"I'm talking about power. Not the feeble blades of man or corpse, but true power?"

"I think she's gone mad." Alyssa interjected.

"I know she is." Constance commented.

"Fools!" Webs began, "You stand here with your weapons, thinking you'll die. Well, you won't!"

"What!?" the three women yelled out suddenly.

"Watch this!" Webs said.

She unhooked the book from her side and to the surprise of all, it hovered in front of her and opened itself to a page. The book glowed a dim purple which seemed to shoot into Webs' eyes before her hand suddenly caught fire. The fire seemed weak, but took on the shape of her hand perfectly. Webs' expression changed from glee to dead calm in a matter of seconds, and as suddenly as that had happened, a wall of superheated fire shot forth from her extended hand. It melted enemies swiftly and mercilessly while the sand beneath their feet turned to glass wherever the flames touched it.

Alyssa gasped as the undead numbers slimmed to a mere 400 in a slow, steady burn which seemed to last forever. Grimmaldi yawned at the lack of action while Constance, red hot with rage yelled out in jealousy.

"I did not come here to see you take all the credit!"

"Constance, no!" Alyssa begged.

"This again. Oh well, why the heck not. Wait, you half-baked smith! Some of those are mine!" Grimmaldi shouted.

With a sigh from Webs, the flames died down and the three women charged recklessly into the remaining horde. First by themselves, taking out several of the undead, then followed by the other villagers as they saw the women hold their ground.

Webs shook her head in disapproval and looked at the villagers as if they were a bunch of overconfident, ungrateful children, but said nothing. Instead, she sheathed her dagger and sat on the porch of a nearby house, watching them as they fought.

Bryan took a blow to the head, nearly instantly and killed him outright. Alyssa, enraged by the sight, threw herself at three undead which were slashing away at Bryan's friend but after laying low another undead, got surprised by a blade cutting into her legs.

Constance picked her sister up and shoved her way past the villagers who'd now started retreating to spread the undead out more, but Alyssa passed out.

Meanwhile, the loud grunt of Grimmaldi sounded from somewhere between them all each time a crack could be heard. She was holding up fine, but even so retreated when she saw the villagers fall back.

The remaining undead fell as predicted, and the villagers assured of their victory, clapped and cheered loudly at the sight of their fallen enemies. They needed no heroes. In fact, they believed themselves heroes now that they'd succeeded where so many others had failed. But their glory was short-lived. All over the village, the dead rose again with their guards among them. 400 Dead stood before them, armed and ready to fight again while the villagers themselves stood in shock of the sight.

Webs laughed again and clapped sarcastically.

"Self-proclaimed heroes of Grendel! I think you've celebrated too early!"

"Of course you would say that, witch!" Grimmaldi spat.

"Only an ignorant primitive would see that as an insult." Webs mused.

"Enough! Both of you!" Alyssa commanded.

"Spoilsport."

The battle began anew before anyone could reply, swords clashed and flesh was cut on both sides, but the people of Grendel had a great disadvantage as the cold and the fight had greatly drained their energy. Even Webs, whose powerful magic turned one undead after another to ash, could feel her tired body slowly give way under the strain these undead were putting on her. Grimmaldi, in a final desperate attempt to end this once and for all, began pounding skulls into the ground all around her and fought her way into the enemy horde. Finally, her body gave way under the countless blows she sustained there and ended her final stand in tragedy.

The stable boy who'd been in love with her since first he met her, threw himself in after her, hoping to keep them from infecting his beloved's body with their undeath. But after keeping them at bay for a time, the brave boy fell just like Grimmaldi had before him.

Several other villagers followed shortly after, forming a line and using pikes to impale the heads of the fallen dead. They did so until the sky finally cleared, the rain stopped and the sun shone weakly through the trees which instilled in them a newfound vigor. They fought with the strength of hope and the desperation of loss combined to fell their enemies and reclaim their town for themselves. But a guttural command and slow rumbling hiss later, the undead grew in strength and overtook the brave men and women who had formed the line.

Webs snatched a water skin from the person in front of her, drank from it and with a deep sigh conjured a blade of fire which cut through the undead horde in front of her, but every time she cut one side down, the horde advanced on another. Finally, she had to abandon the fight and run for the only building that made sense. The barracks where the guards had stayed. Constance with her

wounded sister in tow and villagers following closely, followed webs inside, losing several of the villagers along the way.

For hours on end, the undead clawed and hacked away at the door in an attempt to get through, to no avail.

"Well I hope she's happy now." Webs pouted.

"What are you talking about?" one of the villagers prompted.

"I'm talking about a person, and her name was Grimmel!" Webs spat.

"Why would you hope she's happy?" Alyssa asked.

"I could have burnt them all if she hadn't stopped me. Now I can't even conjure a matchstick."

"Really!? We just lost a friend and *you're* thinking about your *stupid* magic!? Get over yourself!" Alyssa hissed.

The others simply sat against the walls in silence staring angrily at the steel doors, with the exception of some of the women who had broken out in tears over their fallen husbands or the children they'd sent off to the capital. If anything, the situation seemed hopeless. They would either see the undead break through the steel door after all or starve to death under the relentless assault. Either outcome would result in them becoming part of the horde they'd tried to stop.

"If only we could get at the Lich's phylactery. That would stop this whole mess." Webs commented finally.

"Phylactery?" Alyssa asked, "What are you talking about?"

"There isn't just one Lich. There have been many."

"What do you mean?"

"A Lich is an undead spell caster, who has used its magical powers to unnaturally extend its life. An integral part of this is for the spell caster to create a magic phylactery to hold its life force. They can be any item kept at the Lich's place of origin." Webs explained.

"How the heck are we supposed to find that?"

"Suppose you could find out where the lich came from and get there. All you'd need to do is trash the place and the Lich would be a goner."

"Same question, different subject."

"Well, I don't have a lot of juice left in me, but I should be able to squeeze out one little divination to find this guy's place of origin."

"And how do you think we'd get there?"

"There's a sewer system under this town, right? We'll go through that and head out of this hellhole."

Alyssa and Constance contemplated this for a while, then looked to the others hoping to get the thumbs up. All they got in the end were a few shrugs and sighs which indicated that they were up for anything that didn't involve dying at the hands of the undead, so they agreed.

The plan was that they would open up the sewer, go in and slowly make their way out of the city and into the river. Preferably not breathing in too much or making the typical noises that come with disgust, as that would give away their position.

Webs laughed at the idea of them trotting through waste, then asked for absolute silence while she attempted to divine the location of the Lich's phylactery.

A few tense moments passed as everyone held their breath, but then Webs began to speak.

"I see a town with a mill, it's in flames and the dead moan under the wreckage. It seems like it lies west of the river."

"What else?" Constance prompted.

"There is a mausoleum on the outer edge of town with black eyes and an angel's wings watching the entrance. Within is a system of hallways where the voice of the living falls silent under the cloak of a comforting crone."

"Cryptic much?" Alyssa scoffed.

"Mock me if you must, but at least we have a heading now. And we know that something in that tomb still guards the phylactery. This may get hairy."

"Crones always are. Let's just go." Constance mocked.

As they opened the sewer, Alyssa became aware of two things. One, that the smell in there was about as inviting as the flaming maw of an angry dragon. And two, that if she were to jump in there, her wound would get infected so badly she would die from a single cut, which was an embarrassing thought to say the least.

"Constance."

"What?"

"I can't go."

"What do you mean? Alyssa, of course you can."

Alyssa looked down at her leg, emphasizing the bandaged cut on her leg. "No, I can't."

"I'm not leaving you here to be eaten."

"I'm not helpless! Besides, what are the odds of them getting through the door before you guys find the Lich's phylactery?"

Constance shook her head, kissed her sister's forehead and opened the sewer, jumping in first.

The others reluctantly followed her down and walked slowly through the sewer system. A few of them got close to making a noise along the way but were just able to stop themselves upon seeing the undead pushing on toward Alyssa and her -hopefully- impenetrable door.

In their attempt to be quiet Constance, Webs and their small band of frightened villagers had taken over two hours to get to the river where they washed up. Webs looked them all intently in the eyes and gestured to the west.

They walked through the water and got colder by the minute when finally they reached a western bank where half a windmill stood, like a bright flaming testament to Webs' power. Although, by now, they had enough sense to know that when Webs spoke, one was to listen.

As they got closer, the moans of undead villagers trapped under the rubble of the buildings they'd been in, rose up almost like a warning. Some were hungry calls, some were suffering, but none were living. Even the church in front of the graveyard had lost its tower and its walls crushed beneath the weight.

Absolutely nothing had been spared, except for the pristine mausoleum set in the center of the graveyard. Its marble façade shining bright under the sun and its gates set open as if to welcome any visitors to come take a look at the dangerous beauty inside.

Webs stopped dead in her tracks, seconds after stepping through the gates.

"The black eyes must have been a symbol for the obsidian orbs there." She said as she pointed at the obsidian orbs sitting in the roof of the mausoleum's outer structure.

"Great. So where are the angel's wings?" Constance commented.

Webs looked around, taking in the many details. The intricate carvings on the pillars, the unlit lanterns next to the entrance, and finally the doors to the structure. They depicted an angel, as if she had fallen against the stone slab and fused with it instantly. Webs smiled and pointed at them.

"You wanted angel wings, look in front of you. The doors might surprise you."

Constance sighed, took her mace and smashed through them, grinning wickedly at Webs as she did.

"Wings, huh. Where?" Constance laughed.

Webs shook her head, gestured at the villagers to follow and stepped slowly into the now open tomb. The air inside smelled musty and slightly waxy. The stairs down were stone slabs, decayed by the ages and the walls were cracked. In some places, they had even collapsed, making it look every bit as ominous as Webs had expected a Lich's lair to be. The halls down stairs were deathly quiet and the sounds of Constance, Webs and the villagers' footsteps were muffled by the thick walls and dirt around them.

Nothing hinted at the presence of any living thing down here, except for the occasional lit torch or dustless doorway. The rooms they looked into were elaborate tombs, to this lord and that or to the Lady of a time long forgotten. But then, turning right and finding a single room in the middle of the hallway, they found an open tomb and a feeling of dread washed over them. Constance went in and read the stone slab at the base.

"Lady Sorena Ferar, ruler in the time of famine, healer of the sick. May she rest easy in the garden of eternal bliss. That doesn't sound too bad."

As if she'd given the cue, the torches inside the room lit up and the ones in the hallway doused instantly. Then, the shadows from the hallway leaked into the room and fused with the shadows behind the open tomb, giving form to a female figure which was laughing maniacally.

"So, you few believe yourselves worthy do you?"

"Worthy of what, spirit?" Constance barked.

“Worthy of the gift of life.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

The ethereal form laughed again and made itself solid before them. She was a young woman in a torn dress, black as if touched by fire. Her cloak was black as night and seemed to swell and shrink with the spirit’s words. Her voice went through skin and bone, yet her eyes were comforting and kind.

“I have little interest in jokes. Now, your business or your lives.”

“My lady,” Webs said, “we need the Lich’s phylactery kept within this crypt.”

“And why do you seek it?” The spirit asked sharply.

“To bring it to our lord Lich my lady.” Webs bluffed.

“DO NOT TEST ME MORTAL! Tell me why !”

“My apologies, my lady. We seek to end the tide of death following in his wake.”

A low rumble resonated throughout the crypts and the lady spoke once more.

“Then, by the contract between myself and the Lich will be fulfilled. If you survive, you may have what you seek.”

“Before we fight, my lady. Why would one call you *crone*?”

The spirit laughed as her skin blistered and fell as if fire and time caught up with her.

“Because of my magic, young mage.” The crone said while her form faded into nothing in front of them.

The torches lit around them and once again the walls shook violently. This time, the shaking was followed by the lamenting moans of the rising dead assaulting their ears from all throughout the crypt.

Constance readied her mace, the villagers gathered behind her with their weapons in hand, looking around nervously. But nothing happened. The shuffling and moans stayed distant, almost taunting them. At one point, it even seemed like the risen dead would stop their advance and slumber where they stood. Unfortunately, the situation was far more dire than it seemed.

Within seconds, the villagers’ numbers were thinned by half as three of them were dragged, screaming into the darkness. The resulting panic had the remaining three villagers, Webs and Constance back to back, ready for the next assault whenever it came.

The first assault by the risen dead got held off with ease. Their heads, separated from their bodies by the waiting blades of the villagers. The second however, came from every side at once. In a flash, the undead appeared in front of them, slashing and biting. Constance smashed into the crowned corpse in front of her, and continued even when the body had turned to pulp under her blows. The villagers kept stabbing and hacking at the corpses on their side, but could not stop one of them from getting bitten. Webs on the other hand, moved her dagger in a fluent motion and drove it through the head of the corpse in priest robes stumbling at her.



When the final one fell, the villagers fled in terror, unwilling to fight with the possibility of dying. Constance and Webs yelled after them with increasing offense, but to no avail. The two women now stood alone against any possible threat still coming their way and this realization struck home. Constance thought of her sister and what would happen if she couldn't complete the mission while Webs cursed under her breath at the limitations of her own magic.

A deep rumble sounded from deep within the crypts followed closely by grinding noises and the two women did not know what to expect. They held their respective weapons high and looked around quickly. Suddenly a giant creature came into view. This colossal thing seemed to be made up out of random parts of dead humans. Its massive head consisted of three human heads partly attached to each other. Each mouth drooling hungrily and uttering incoherent words and sounds. Its body was a writhing mass of torsos and arms, the function of which seemed minimal. Two giant arms plated in primitive armor and two deformed feet suggested that a giant had been worked into this abomination, though what it was made out of was less of a concern than what damage it could do.

The creature moved towards Webs and Constance with a constant speed, smashing walls as it did. Webs looked at Constance intently.

"You want me to initiate then?"

"After you."

Constance sped towards the hulking mass and smashed several of its arms and breaking them, followed closely by Webs who ran up Constance's back, leapt up and stabbed one of its eyes. It howled in pain and smashed at Constance who only barely dodged its giant fist, then tried to grab Webs who reacted by stabbing another eye.

With just one eye left, it frantically smashed at the walls, the floor and the two women hitting only the solid stone. Constance took advantage of the arm smashing in front of her to run up it, smash the arm and splinter the bone within, but as she lifted her mace to smash the head and end the fight, one of the smaller arms grabbed her leg. Constance lost her balance, slipping off the creature's shoulder and smacking onto the floor with her own mace crashing mere inches next to her head. Webs laughed, stabbed frantically at the creature's neck and finally leapt off, looking smugly at the creature though it still stood. The creature swayed from side to side, whipping its flaccid arms at either side when with a ripping sound, its head loosed and rolled down one of its arms, landing at Webs' feet.

The creature fell and the spirit of the lady appeared once more.

"Brave warriors. Your worth has been proven and paid for in blood. Fare thee well."

Suddenly, with a loud crash and a flash of green light, the wall behind the creature opened into what seemed like a mage's study wracked with books and tomes of all sorts. On a stand in the middle of this room, lay a book which glowed a deep red and pulsed in a rhythm similar to a heart.

Seeing this, Webs turned back to Constance and slapped her face a number of times, trying to wake her up.

"Stop it!" Constance suddenly yelled.

"What? You were knocked out."

"No, I was in pain from the fall and kept my eyes closed to focus on getting used to it."

“Oh well, better safe than sorry.” Webs smiled.

Webs offered Constance her hand and helped her to her feet.

“Thanks, I guess.” Constance said.

Webs simply shrugged at her and made her way toward the room. Constance followed closely, picking up her mace just in case.

The closer they got, the more improbable it seemed to them. That destroying a single tome could end an entire war. It was almost ridiculous. But they both knew they had to try. They had fought the undead in the village and in these crypts, they had lost friends and fellow townsfolk and they had been forced to leave a friend behind.

Webs grabbed a torch from the wall on her way in, stood on one side of the tome and waited for Constance to stand on the other side. Then she held the torch between them and smiled.

Constance knowing what Webs meant, took the torch, and together with Webs set fire to the phylactery.

The fire burned in all colors as the tome shrieked and pleaded for life in the voice of the had been mage. Its cover melted through the pages beneath and finally let out a deep, hissing gasp. Then, everything went deathly silent again. The war was finally over.

Across the realm, the dead fell where they stood, dropping their weapons. The Lich disintegrated, leaving behind a charred hole in the town of Grendel. Alyssa still sat near the sewer opening in Grendel’s barracks, watching as the steel door which kept her alive peeled open partially and abruptly stopped. The sun teased her skin through the slight gap, and she knew her sister had succeeded.

When Constance and Webs returned that evening, they were welcomed by Alyssa and the villagers who had returned from the capital, as heroes. A feast was given in their honor and their names were recorded in the town’s registry as defenders of the town and destroyers of the grey flood.

They had shown the people of Grendel and those of the entire world, that when heroes make plans, the common people may rise to take their place.