

It started like pressure in Viv's ears, the same feeling as sitting in a plane taking off. She yawned by reflex but it didn't do anything. Air was not the issue there, mana was. She didn't need Solfis' measurement to tell the black mana concentration was increasing.

It occurred to her that keeping a way out would have been preferable, at least so there was a direction black mana could escape to. Now they were trapped in the equivalent of an oven.

Viv poured every last bit of what she had into the shield, priming them. Sidjin backed her up with his might but all of this felt so futile, so small compared to the wave coming to them, like building a sand castle to stop the tide.

The passage turned darker, then black, and still the necrarch had not come. It was merely the manifestation of its hatred, forfeiting his games to throw everything it had at them. The screams were close now and they were disturbingly human. Viv stopped herself from listening to the insane warbles through sheer willpower, though her mind would catch on syllables, trying to make sense of them. That way led to madness. She only had a couple of seconds left.

The necrarch came, heralded by a cloud of sheer destruction. Only its horns could be seen from the cloud of noxious black mana rushing at them. One instant it was at the edge of the tunnel. The next, it was on them.

Viv could maybe stop the cloud. She could not stop the necrarch. To step outside the shield was to die, she thought.

Solfis did it anyway. The golem stepped through the shield with a calm Viv could not conjure.

### **//OVERDRIVE MODE ENGAGED.**

Solfis disappeared but Viv could hear it. Solar and Irao stayed. They would be eaten alive in the miasma, Viv knew. Sidjin was maintaining the shield. It was up to her.

When Solfis fell, so would the shield, and then they would die without a chance to fight back. She had to remove some of that black mana. Siphon it away, somehow. Viv placed her hands against the shields. Her reserves were immediately full. There was so much energy in there, hers for the taking, but she didn't have an outlet.

That was fine.

Could make one instead. She placed her right hand through the shield and bit her lips from the pain. Even through the gloves, even with her natural resistance, the annihilation cloud gnawed at her skin, setting her nerves on fire. The acid of the necrarch's wrath was eating her alive.

"Excalibur."

Viv intentionally botched the spell. A normal Excalibur kept the mana on a close, tight loop to prevent loss. She cut that loop open to let the expanded energy out. This created a very

narrow and very powerful version of her werfer spell. Immediately, she aimed it at the monster's shape she could perceive through the noxious veil.

At first, nothing happened, then she was looking into a pair of crimson orbs filled with so much rage that any trace of cunning had been lost. The animalistic focus landed on her, squeezing her mind under its tremendous weight. Its arm had regrown.

Viv's fist was on fire. Blood was pooling at the bottom of the lacerated glove.

Solfis used the creature's distraction to jump on its back, landing two claws at the base of its neck. The necrarch jumped back to squash Solfis against the wall. She heard a dreadful crack, but soon the sounds of battle resumed.

She grit her teeth and increased the power of the spell to its maximum, keeping her tired mind on this task and just this task. Nothing mattered except draining the necrarch's cloud.

Slowly, it weakened. Viv realized three things.

First, some of the cloud escaped back into the corridor, which meant Sidjin had not sealed it yet. It was a good call.

Second, more of the cloud drifted up from the holes Solar had pierced with his aura. The sword master had pierced all through the entire damn mountain flank.

Third, the cloud was helping Solfis.

To Viv's surprise, Solfis' glyphs were drinking the magic with gluttonous greed, soaking up all that energy to sustain the golem's maximum power mode. The alien magic empowered him. They were almost there, almost —

A shock, no air in her lungs. A broad, white face close to hers. her heart skipped a bit before she realized it was Irao. He had pushed her out of the way.

The assassin disappeared while she scrambled to her feet. She didn't know what had happened. The shield was broken. Sidjin was against the wall, bleeding from his nose and eyes yet casting spells anyway. The necrarch was in the room. The battle was on. Sidjin activated the tunnel spell and collapsed.

Viv made sure she had her helmet and shield on, then she moved to her lover in the brief moment the fight had moved to the other side of the room. She placed a wall over him, a thick one, then it was on. Just like last time, the battle was a whirlwind of death and deadly grace while she and Arthur next to her did their best to provide support. Arthur seemed to be working on making the ground more even around Solar who moved the least of all, while Viv drained the cloud around the necrarch to ensure her side would not have to fight against the very air around them. Once again, Solfis jumped on the creature's back before jumping out when it attempted to smash it against the wall. Viv heard another telltale crack of something breaking, then the necrarch howled. She understood.

Because of its simian form, the necrarch could not reach its own spine so Irao had stabbed it several times, leaving his deathly instruments biting deep into its flesh. By forcing it to crash against a wall, Solfis made the monster use its own strength to make the blades bite even deeper. Its spine was getting crushed progressively. It was still far from over, however.

The creature grabbed Solfis, accepting to lose the hand on its recently regrown arm to do so. Viv heard a crack, saw two of Solfis' claws fly off in pieces, but the golem was trapped until Irao landed on the wrist, almost severing it. The golem used this briefest of windows to twist on itself and impossibly escape the necrarch's grasp. The sight of a wounded Solfis almost made her want to intervene more, to attach spells to that monstrosity and drain it of its resources, but it would be a foolish move. Right now, she was a speck in a battle of giants. The last thing she wanted was to be promoted from annoyance to diversion.

Slowly, Viv continued to drain while Arthur kept the arena mostly stable. Their foe's reckless abandon landed a few glancing blows on Solfis and Irao, but the golem always managed to block mid air while Irao was simply... not there anymore when the attack landed. As for Solar, he matched every blow with one of their own, something the necrarch seemed to have difficulties understanding. Viv was constantly at full capacity yet dared not use her power. She crept along the walls, sweat dripping down her neck despite the chill in the air. It was the most deadly game of 'the floor is lava', with the lava occupying three quarters of the room in the form of a blender of steel and bone.

Viv didn't know how long that lasted, but slowly, the necrarch became more ripped flesh and exposed bone than pallid skin. It slowed down, then slowed down more with every crippled articulation. She was starting to believe.

Something changed in the air.

Viv felt it. She didn't know if it was battle experience, finally, or some soul fuckery at play. The necrarch stood to its full height with its horns scraping the ceiling. It knew. Sanity, such as it was, had returned. It was losing badly.

Two deeply evil eyes searched the room and found Viv. Her danger sense screamed. She did not even hesitate.

"Excalibur!"

The mangled spell vomited a cone of destruction in front of her, licking the beast as it was jumping forward. It screamed in agony. Viv saw more bones than ever before. She had hurt it. It was weakened. Irao and Solfis hounded it and a ball of fire from Arthur caught it in the leg. It made to the exit, the very same exit Sidjin hadn't had the time to close before he collapsed. It was going to escape, except when Viv watched, Solar was there.

With two feet firmly planted on the ground, the tired warrior felt solid as a mountain and just as irremovable. The mess of cuts and shattered bones the monster had become rushed him and for the first time, Irao and Sidjin ran away. Viv felt it too, that strange feeling of pressure. The only similar experience she could compare it to would be to stand in front of a starting turbine a few seconds before startup. She crouched and made herself very, very small.

The necrarch spat acid but Solar steppe aside and lifted his blade. Then, he *cut*.

Even though Viv wasn't in the trajectory, she could not breathe. The world became a tunnel with some random fragment at the end, pieces of the opposite wall. Nothing mattered except that. If she looked away, she would die. If she closed her eyes, she would die. A gasp brought some much needed air to her tired lungs. Another. It was so hard to just breathe.

And then it was done.

Viv looked up to see the necrarch frozen in its tracks. Nobody moved. With exquisite detail, she saw a gash open from shoulder to groin and widen. She had the time to feel the blood dripping from a cut on her lips. It wasn't from biting them, merely from being on the wrong side of the room.

Elation filled Viv's heart. It didn't last long.

The necrarch hissed with its last breath. It swung the arm with the missing hand, which detached itself cleanly.

The improvised projectile flew to Solar as he winded down and pierced his chest. It stayed there, planted like a defiant flag before falling, as its owner fell as well, defeated for good. Blood gushed from Solar's wound. It dripped down the pitted armor, crimson on black.

"Fuck," Viv cried.

Acuity +1

Lost Heiress (9/10)

Your acuity has reached a milestone!

Viv brushed the notification aside. Now was not the time! She immediately rushed to Solar's side as he kneeled, bleeding on the ground.

"On your back," she ordered. "Now. Solfis, expose his chest."

"Bibiane. My heart has stopped. I know what this means. I have been expecting my death for \_\_\_"

**//Do as she says.**

"I would rather die on my... oh, very well," Solar said as he was pushed back.

Solfis expertly unfastened his heavy chest piece, tossing the metal cover aside and working buttons and buckles faster than any EMT. In short order, Viv had a full view of Solar's chest.

He had a deep laceration between the third and fourth at the edge of the sternum. Striating lines of black expanded from the wound, growing as Viv watched. She placed her hand on the gash to hold the blood in and used her last dregs of focus to pull the black mana out.

It felt immeasurably easier than when she'd done it for Jor, back in the Baranese fort. Before he'd died.

"This was a good fight, a fitting end to my existence. My only regret is that I will not live to see the birth of my child," Solar lamented in the most melodramatic way.

"Ok, black mana purged."

She poured a high-quality flesh mending potion on the wound. Thankfully, the bone was intact.

"Bibiane, my high endurance and willpower are keeping me conscious, but it will not last. I would prefer if you could accept the situation and receive my last words."

"Get someone else, I'm busy. Drink this."

The blade master searched for alternatives. His gaze landed on Solfis' skeletal face, Irao's blank expression, then Arthur's snout.

"Drink. This," Viv insisted. The man agreed and the wound closed, mostly. The flesh was pink and Viv knew she could peel it off with a finger. It would take an hour or so to solidify to match the rest of Solar's herculean body. If he had an hour. It was time for CPR. She interlocked her fingers and pressed on the sternum. Five centimeters deep was easily achieved but Solar could no longer speak. Still, he let her work, watching her sadly. She sure could use an automatic defib unit now. Ah well.

Viv kept pumping, two per seconds. It could work. It had worked for her, and—

Solar took an immense breath, the chest arcing so much Viv was pushed aside. The man moved on his side then coughed his lung out. Not literally. Viv sat back on her ass.

After ten seconds so of a hacking cough, Solar sat back and placed a hand on his chest, looking a bit lost. Viv took his pulse from the carotid.

"Aaaaaand we have return of spontaneous circulation. You are welcome."

She stood up, peeled off her gloves and looked at her right hand. It looked like she'd been caught in razor wire, with long gashes oozing blood, but nothing critical. It was painful though. An errant line of energy had sliced into her pinkie's nail and that was the worst. She took a second potion and emptied it. Unfortunately, the wounds scarred on the spot.

**//The black mana was too concentrated.**

"Between the dragon scar on my arm and now this, Nyil isn't good for my skin."

**//Perhaps you can get a toe frozen by blue mana next time.  
//For variety's sake.**

"Har har. Speaking of, how is the hand?"

**//I will have a minor functionality loss.  
//Unfortunately, the damage is too extreme to be self-repaired.  
//I will find a way to do so, or a way to obtain a better frame.  
//Do not be concerned.**

"I'm alive!" Solar suddenly exclaimed. It seemed he had finally realized his heart had restarted for good. "I'm alive. I'm really alive. I can feel my heartbeat."

"Yes. Congratulations."

"I can't believe it!"

"Pinch yourself?"

Solar blinked.

"Why?"

"So you will know you are not dreaming?"

"I already know that!"

"Ugh! Whatever! Next time, remember to keep your remarks to yourself! You don't get to tell me who I can save and who I can't, alright?"

Viv realized she was a little emotional. Solar too. Despite his experience, he was on the verge of tears.

"I thought I was going to leave Wamiri alone. Miss my child..."

**//This is all a fascinating display of organic, hormone-based decision making.  
//A majestic sight.  
//However, we should secure the place first.**

"You secure the place," Viv retorted, "I want to make Sidjin comfortable."

Having a shield break would not be lethal to a mage of Sidjin's caliber but it would still hurt like hell. Viv walked to her lover, then made a bed of softened eldritch walls and spare clothes. She took the time to wipe the drying blood on his face and placed a wet, cold towel on his forehead. As expected, he woke up while the others were patrolling.

"Wha— ow!"

He winced in pain but his expression softened almost immediately. Viv remembered he had pain tolerance at a higher tier than most humans alive. Nevertheless, he proved to be wise enough not to force it.

“Since I’m alive, I assume we killed it?”

“Yes, though Solar almost got done in. I think we can recover here for a little while, move on later.”

“I didn’t get to close the tunnel. Sorry.”

“It didn’t matter in the end. Besides, having a path for the black mana to leave proved useful. We have a saying where I come from. No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. That means, you need to have a plan and then adapt as soon as the action begins.”

“It sounds smart.”

“Hey, my country has the most military victories in recorded history,” said the citizen of the country that had possibly lost the most wars in recorded history.

“Fascinating. Now, since we are not at risk of immediate death, my dear, I’m going back to sleep. Goodbye.”

And just as he had warned, Sidjin was out cold in seconds. Viv chased off ideas of internal bleeding and strokes. He had been hit by a mana break, not a rock to the head. It would be fine.

Now that she had a moment, it was time to have a look at her gains.

Your acuity has reached a milestone!  
You may now keep your perception of time slowed for entire battles at a lesser cost of mental stamina. You may cast up to three spells at once. Your mental speed has vastly improved. Your fine control has vastly improved. You will find it easier to notice small details and anomalies.

Perception was typically tied to finesse, so it was nice to see hers was finally picking up. It could only work well with her danger sense.

Viv noticed that her Lost Heiress path had progressed by one step, but it was tied with the mental stats milestone. She felt that both achievements and abilities were required to progress. She was confident achievements were not an issue here, therefore she didn’t match the minimal requirements to progress. That was fine. Having a more unique profile affected the number of unique paths. It was just an investment.

There were more gains as well.

### Leadership: Intermediate 2 -> 4

That was probably due to the success of her initiative. She suspected her skill might also have a passive effect in battle, allowing combatants on her side to cooperate more effectively. Officers and general paths had more specialized skills that worked only in a military setting. Those skills were probably more effective, being more specialized, but she'd take what she could. It was fine not to be the best at everything.

### Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 2 -> 4

That skill governed instinctive casting as a response to a threat. She had used it several times against the necrarch, yet the jump in level still surprised her. It proved that success against tall odds mattered in the eyes of magic.

Your expedition has killed the unkillable!

Because of your repeated murder (and subsequent cooking) of large-sized or just dangerous wildlife, inspection will now return the detail 'huntress' when used on you. Congratulations. Please kill more wiggly things and leave my stuff alone, thank you.

Oi! Also, she wouldn't be cooking undead any time soon. Just... ew. And it seemed Nous still hadn't forgiven her for her accidental and really limited, not to mention quickly repaired damage to his property.

How long could an immortal, petty god keep grudges, she wondered?

Yeah, probably a long time. Damn! In any case, her profile was shaping up to be powerful if eclectic.

#### Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother
- VANDAL

#### Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 35.7%



Physical		Mental	
Power	21	Focus	39
Finesse	23	Acuity	40
Endurance	26	Willpower	40

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 4	Athletics	Intermediate 5
Survival	Intermediate 2	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Beginner 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7	Soul mastery	Beginner 4

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Intermediate 1
Arcane Constructs	Intermediate 3	Danger sense	Intermediate 4
Leadership	Intermediate 4	Draconic Intimidation	Expert 2
Acuity reflex	Intermediate 4		

Not bad.

**//Your Grace.**

“Loot!” Viv said, excitedly.

Solfis handed her the prize and she shivered in pleasure.

If the nascent necrarch’s shields were the size of pomelos and already had more mana than she could reasonably use in a single battle, the true necrarch’s core was enormous, easily as long as her forearm. It was also inexplicably shaped like a lozenge. She had always assumed that cores maintained their circular shape no matter what. All the cores she had seen so far were round without exception and she had seen quite a few of them in her enchantment class. Perhaps this peculiarity only extended to exceptional specimens. The Academy hadn’t let them work with their finest products. Anyway, it was weird. After manipulating the object for a while and being weirded out by its weightlessness, Viv entrusted it back to Solfis. It was done. They had fulfilled their main objective. Between this and the cursed mace, she might have decreased her indentured period by more than a half

with seven or eight months left on the timer, if she was being cautious. Things were looking up.

Maybe she would still serve that asshole for a couple of years, but it wouldn't be the decades of labor she had envisioned at the beginning, if everything went well.

After a little while, the group decided to go to sleep since Solfis assured them he would hold guard. Solar's improvised ventilation system now allowed both fresh air and the Deadshield Wood's thick brown mana into the room. Between this and the remnant of the gods' blessing, the place felt fine, though not homey.

Sidjin woke up in the middle of the night leading to Arthur leaving in a huff because her pillow wiggled. The couple used the opportunity granted by their relative intimacy to engage in a little celebration. Everyone left the cave at dawn.

The team deliberated over breakfast.

"I say we should check the lair. It would be a shame to leave something behind now that the main threat is eliminated," Sidjin said.

"I'm also concerned about the presence of nascent necrarchs. If there were three, there could be more and if they manage to escape, then they could arrive at the nearby Merl city in a single night. I don't want that to happen."

"We have some time before we are due to return, anyway. I have no objection," Solar said.

**//I agree that this is the proper course.**

*Gold!*

Irao reappeared just long enough to shrug.

**//We have unanimity minus one abstention.**

**//Stay on your guard.**

The squad made sure to wear their armor, now significantly rattier than before. This time, they moved straight down the main tunnel instead of going back to the upper floor. They found a small series of rooms on their left, most of them dark and used as secondary barracks for soldiers apparently. The black mana concentration had already decreased enormously over the last few hours. Viv suspected that the Deadshield Woods were now pushing to reclaim their lost grounds and that, if she returned later, the caves would be filled with mushrooms and wildlife. Now was the best time to check things out.

Past the statues, the cavern widened until the mountain felt fully hollowed out. A great cathedral of natural stone pillars and tall vaults swallowed them, their surfaces carved with faded engravings depicting scenes of hunts, ceremonies of a religious nature including sacrifices, celebrations, burials. The list was long but incomplete. Just like the statues, some of them had turned into twisted versions of themselves while others had disappeared

entirely. Claw marks from the necrarch criss-crossed the surface, grooves dug deep where it had made regular trails. She just imagined facing the monster in that maze of stone and shivered.

“Good call not fighting it here,” she commented.

Her voice echoed eerily in the unusual silence. The air of general malevolence was gone, yet the void that had replaced it filled her with unease. It was too quiet. And her companions were too damned silent!

**//The terrain would have provided the creature with an overwhelming advantage.**

**//Lesser hunters might have disarmed the traps and thought it was enough.**

“Yeah...” Viv replied half-heartedly.

The golem was right. The elite of the elite of mankind plus her and Arthur had banded together and they had still almost lost a man. Necrarchs were scary. In any case, it was done now.

The group now made free use of light enchantments, which let Viv appreciate the natural formations around her. They found an altar at the bottom of the cave, or what was left of it. It looked like it had been split by a falling cruise ship. The blow had even broken the ground.

“Someone was angry,” she said.

“It’s safe to say a lot of people were. You may not be familiar with the spell but a lot of the damage you see on the lower portion of the structures are spell-based. Brown bolts and quite a few cracks made by a rapid temperature change indicate a spellcaster battle of great proportion.”

Now that he mentioned it, Viv realized that much of the wear and tear was not due to time. If there were any explanation left behind, it had disappeared over the centuries. They went on.

A pair of arches led to the deepest sanctum, where Viv surmised artifacts and objects of the cults had been kept. A few beds showed that those were probably the dwellings of high priests or important people. The place had been thoroughly wrecked. Nothing had survived except fragments of shattered bas-reliefs piled in corners like detritus. The invaders had smashed every statue, every carving. Viv considered how much effort it had taken and thought she was missing something. Neriad and Maradoc had felt relaxed in her presence, joking merrily in their little tea glasshouse, but this level of systematic destruction spoke of a hatred so deep, it had endured past victory. The invaders had not just won, they had slaughtered the vanquished, then they had erased every last trace of their existence, toppled all their monuments, defaced all of their idols. Only the statues at the entrance remained, possibly as a warning. Viv couldn’t imagine what could push a man like Neriad to such a pit of hatred, but the human sacrifice carvings could be a hint.

Silently, the squad kept going, patiently exploring the private quarters and finding nothing of value. The complex ran deeper still, until they found themselves at the very heart of the

mountain, in a large square room split in two by a wall. Five demolished altars formed a half circle around a gap partially filled with large stones. An inscription, carved with a sword, covered the middle wall across its length.

Solfis stopped and looked. Viv imagined he was deciphering the text. It took him a while to do so, then some more time to come to a decision.

**//Your Grace.**

**//The implication of what I am reading is... disturbing.**

“Oh yes, the gods warned me that I should keep what I learn quiet. Hmm. You should probably do the same, guys.”

“The gods spoke to you?” Solar asked, surprised.

“Yes, when I prayed to them earlier. Anyway, translate away, Solfis. I want to know what that secret is that I’m not supposed to share.”

**//Very well.**

**//Old gods, tyrants, we consign you to oblivion.**

**//We curse you with our breath and hate you in our hearts.**

**//We break you with our hands.**

**//We leave you behind.**

**//Octas, the limb grafter, the hater of tools, we dismember you with weapons.**

**//Gomogog, the flesh eater, the glutton, we starve you.**

**//Enttiku, the child taker, the death dealer, we deny you our blood.**

“Enttiku was cursed as well?” Irao asked.

He seemed very surprised.

“I think the new gods may have cut a deal with her. Him. Whatever you believe,” Viv said.

**//May I go on?**

“Yes, sorry.”

**//Khaton, of the many diseases, the poisoner, we burn you away.**

**//Gorok the butcher, the tyrant, we split your head asunder.**

Silence and shock spread across the small assembly. Viv had never heard about those dark gods. What’s more, there was one missing.

**//Signed.**

**//Emeric the Fated.**

**//Maranor the Slayer.**

**//Maradoc the Knower.**

**//Neriad the Shield**

**//Sardanal the Bountiful.**  
**//And Efestar the Wayfarer.**

“Oh,” Viv said, “Ooooooooooh, alright, yeah, that is... yeah.”

“Efestar was on the side of the light gods?” Solar whispered. “What, in the name of... them, happened? How?”

**//It does not say.**

“Damn.”

Viv was shocked at this new development. The effect on the others, however, was much more dire, except for Arthur who didn't care. Even Solfis felt more subdued, possibly calculating how this knowledge would affect its own theories. Solar and Sidjin stood transfixed by the characters, staring at them as if they would surrender their secrets. To Viv's knowledge, the inhabitants of Param had little interest in history but they loved stories and myth, and everyone liked stories on the light gods' exploits. They had found and pitied humanity, teaching them elaborate tools, walls, laws, numbers. Civilization. The light gods had lifted mankind and outwitted the dark ones at every turn. After their work was done, they retired to the City of the Gods alongside their champions and other powerful entities to watch over their ever-growing flock. There was never any mention of the before. In fact, Viv had not been aware of a before until she had found the lone mountain.

The Paramese relied a lot on the gods, even in their everyday life. As a modern Earth person, Viv already relied on them as defenders of good. Mostly. For the others, the light gods were an eternal fixture of their lives. They blessed every major milestone of their lives. Temples could be found in every city, the priests within demonstrating true power. It was a shock to realize that they were ascended humans who had cast down the previous pantheon. The meek would wail and fear the possibility of their demise while the rich and powerful would wonder: what if? What if I could be like them? No, she had no objection keeping this little piece of trivia to herself.

She wondered about Efestar, though.

How could one of the light ones become a god of scorn?

No, this was the wrong way to think about it. They were human before, and a human will ally with the devil himself if they consider it a lesser evil. Perhaps Efestar picked scorn and favors the despicable beastlings because he believed himself betrayed, backstabbed by his fellow ascendants. Maybe she'd ask him if they ever met again.

While it was clear the revelation had left the three men shaken, they recovered promptly thanks to their magically-boosted mental resilience. Viv still thought it was weird but this world was filled with horrors, there was no therapist path, and it was healthier than substance abuse. The squad approached the hole in the wall and realized the path had been blocked by fallen masonry, then explosively opened from the inside. The broken stones were still the size of an average desk, at the smallest. It must have taken a stupid amount of

strength to split them. This deep, the black mana was at the same strength as deep in the deadlands, though Viv didn't find it too unpleasant. What proved unpleasant were the marks.

Close to the opening, it became clear that the stones had been locked together tight from the numerous scratches left on their flanks. One side was smooth, the other a patchwork of so many claw marks made on top of each other, it was hard to determine how thick the stone had been to start with.

**//No presence detected.**

With the coast clear, the squad moved on, or in. Viv almost bumped into Irao's broad back. The man was frozen in place. Viv looked up and found out why.

They were now standing in the twin of the previous room in terms of size. It was absolutely impossible to guess what it had been used for. The ground was covered in so much dust it made a small mound upon which a throne of bone and rock waited, but the true spectacle was above. Viv suspected the room might have been square once, but now it was almost round. Every square millimeter of naked rock was covered in layers upon layers of claw marks. They marked each other, the recent above the old. The implication was clear.

The necrarch had first risen as a revenant in this trapped room. Even as it regained cunning as a nascent one, it was still trapped here. It took centuries of waiting in a black-mana saturated den for undead to turn into a necrarch, and she doubted even the brutes they had defeated earlier could have burst out of this well-locked tomb. So the nascent necrarch had tried to find a way out. And it had scratched, and scratched, and scratched. The room had been a rectangle, but now it was close to being a sphere. How many nights spent scraping the rock, she wondered. How many thousands of hours of claws against rock, again, and again, and again.

Yeah, no wonder it was mad.

"I would not wish this upon my worst enemies," Sidjin whispered.

Then Arthur broke the spell.

*Gold.*

*Gold!*

*GOLD!*

The tiny dragon pranced in the dust, surrounding the makeshift throne. She was right. The necrarch had used the possessions of its victims over the ages to adorn its seat of power in a way that seemed childish to Viv. The awkward arrangements jutted out from tilted stone slabs like teeth from a crone's jaw, each more bizarre and grisly than the other. The necrarch had mounted thirteen rings on each finger of a giant, severed hand. Gold ingots of large sizes were planted in the eye sockets of the skulls of monstrous apes, the chitin of massive insects. They glittered eerily in the many-colored lights the intruders had brought with them.

Arthur found a circlet and shook it, dislodging encrusted knuckles from its many thorns. If there was one treasure on this god-forsaken shithole of a planet that screamed 'cursed', that was it.

"Maybe we shouldn't touch any of those before a priest has had a look," Viv suggested.

**//I shall collect the goods and store them until they are cleansed.**

**//They can be later sold, and the profits shared among the members of the expedition.**

"That'd be grand. And, hm, won't you be cursed?"

Viv was suddenly looking into a pair of baleful yellow eyes.

**//If any entity wishes to enforce the curse upon me.**

**//They are welcome to try.**

A memory of Octas' herald oozing blood on the ground while Solfis walked towards Viv, holding its freshly decapitated head in a clawed hand, popped into Viv's mind.

Solfis would be fine.

All in all, they recovered two full bags of goods, mostly precious metal. The few magical weapons were too corroded to be of use, their enchantments stripped by the deleterious effect of black mana. It was still a good haul and Arthur asked for her share immediately. Viv flatly refused, draconic constitution or not. Everyone would wait. It would be safe in the hands of Solfis.

After this was done, they burnt the throne down. Viv tried to pray but no one answered, and they quickly left the noxious smog of black mana as soon as she gave up.

Outside, it was still day.

Viv had a week before she had to be at school and the trip back would not last very long, now that there were teleporters in place. In fact, Sidjin was confident he could get her there in two days, even through the Deadshield Woods. He had a request instead.

"I want to meet the Merl. I want to see them thrive with my own two eyes. I have sacrificed everything to let them escape. I want to see. No, I want to know that it was worth it. Beyond a doubt."

"Of course," Viv whispered.

"And I wouldn't mind a break, but I want it to be with my fellow humans. May I leave and get an advance on the expedition's payment?" Solar asked.

In the end, Irao and Solar elected to leave through the tunnel, taking the ship with them. Sidjin had no need for it. He would set up a permanent platform near the Merl city, if they agreed, then teleport to Losserec-on-the-Lake and, from then on, to Helock. Solfis stayed, of

course, and Arthur took to the skies to hunt. She was frustrated by the delay in getting her rightfully plundered trophies. Viv watched her leave trailing longing thoughts of her gold. The group split apart, their mission completed.