

Viv's perception of time slowed before her brain even registered the lethally dangerous undeads barreling towards them.

The two nascent necrarchs on the side bumped into each other, slowing down ever so slightly. Sidjin caught them in a deadly trap of serrated blades of colorless mana. At the same time, Arthur spat fire and Viv used her oldest trick against the leftmost one.

"Yoink."

Immediately, her mind flooded with the power filling the creature just as her aura gulped their energy, but it hissed and rolled, breaking the connection. The two other nascent necrarchs backed up, flames covering their emaciated bodies. Black mana surged out to quench the flames. One of the creatures opened its maw. Viv and Sidjin reacted almost at the same time.

"Wall."

"Eldritch walls."

Stone sprung from the ground, only to change into a tentacle mass grasping for prey. Magical bile splattered harmlessly against the newly risen barrier. A clawed fist immediately punched through, but the rest of the wall held. Viv was getting much better at making walls that were more wall and less sand now.

Viv cast yoink on the exposed limb while Arthur showed she was truly a caster as well, peppering the nascent necrarchs with stones through their defenses opening, using them as murder holes. The beasts were strong though, and Sidjin worked double time to keep the living protected.

Behind them, Viv heard sounds of fighting and felt mana move but she could do little about that. With Sidjin on the defensive, offense fell to her. They had no need to talk to coordinate.

Viv used her improved mental stats to cast yoink on whatever target she could see, draining them so long as she could maintain the connections. Gods but did those fuckers have a lot of juice to play with. Her desperate game of whack-a-mole continued until Sidjin cast a massive grinder spell, piercing through a weakened wall to hit the beast behind. The mangled nascent was pushed back. Viv saw an arm fly off but knew it wasn't enough to kill it. Had to keep up the damage. Resilient bastards, resisting spells that would shred humans in an instant.

It was also the sign she'd been waiting for. With the two mostly intact nascents scrambling for the opening, she released the spell she'd been building up.

"Blight!"

The overcharged death cloud of disintegrating energy spread out.

Perhaps it occurred to the nascent that they were between a flow of destructive energy and a really solid wall because they started screeching.

One of them made a split decision. It jumped through the expanding wave of death, to Viv's disbelief. She felt before she saw the monster break through and huffed in anger. It looked like a flayed, mutated gorilla now but it was still very much alive. Then an earth spear caught it in the flank, another in the chest. Arthur and Sidjin coordinated to punch the beast back into the cloud, screeching and roaring. A last grinder spell lifted it off its feet to send it stumbling to Viv's death trap. Meanwhile, the second mostly intact nascent had followed the first and seeing its predicament, jumped in zig-zags to avoid the same fate. Viv focused on keeping the cloud stationary and as deadly as possible but she could not bring it back towards her without risking annihilation. With the rest of her focus, she hit the charging nascent with her most powerful yoink. It was the most efficient way she could think of to cancel their incredible resistance. This one kept going, ignoring the rapid drain of its resources as well as Sidjin's barrage of fireballs. It just didn't stop. Viv used all the overflowing mana she'd been collecting and cast the largest purge net she had ever managed.

A dense lattice of finger-thin rays seemed to fracture space in front of her. The void tendrils lashed and whipped with such haste that her vision played tricks on her. The room didn't feel so real anymore. It was half normal stone and half space between the stars. So dense was the network that Sidjin was forced to adapt, sending his offensive spells to the side to arc back into the creatures' flanks.

The critically wounded beast jumped, in a last-ditch effort to get at Viv, but that was the moment Sidjin switched to the offensive. A massive, vertical blade appeared mid-air to bite in the creature's chest. The small construct whirred and sent bloody bits of undead flesh flying. The necrarch almost managed to escape the deadly spell, almost, then Arthur made another stone spear descend from the ceiling right on its neck. That was enough to seal the creature's fate. Meanwhile, Viv had engaged the necrarch they had successfully pushed back into the blight once. This one was now more bone than flesh, but it didn't seem to stop it.

Viv dropped the blight, now that it had done its job. The last necrarch appeared mostly dead on the floor beyond, but the witch was tiring. Could hardly focus. Too many powerful, overcharged spells in a short timeframe. She was already having trouble following the creature's movement. A yoink drained its lifeforce, but it wouldn't be enough.

Arthur jumped on it.

For a moment, Viv panicked. Arthur dodged graciously under a swipe, then clawed the monster's flesh. The nascent necrarch managed to grab one of her wings just on time for her to spit a thick gout of flame in its face. It punched her, and for a moment Viv feared the worst, but the dragonette blocked the blow with her clawed hand, going with the motion. The strength propelled her backward. She twisted mid-air. Her tail lashed at the creature's face, taking out its eyes.

Arthur's apparent distress galvanized Viv's efforts. She poured everything she had into the yonk spell, this time trying to overtake her foe's entire reserves rather than just stealing dregs. The nascent necrarch's mana presence dwarfed that of even the most powerful of mages. It felt like drinking a lake through a straw, but she persevered. The longer the connection lasted, and the deeper she delved into the creature's maw. Arthur spat fire for the third time to buy her some time. The monster countered by vomiting black mana of its own but it wouldn't be enough. A trickle became a flow, then a torrent. Viv claimed all of that energy as her own. One moment, the creature was glaring at her with vicious red eyes, the next, it was bone and ash.

Sidjin had finished the first one. With a wave of his hand, he gathered all the fire in the room on the last mangled nascent necrarch.

Viv breathed. They had done it.

Now, for the main course.

The trio of caster turned to face the fierce battle behind them.

Tired as she was, it took Viv a second to understand the whirlwind of color and patterns in front of her. There was a dark canvas, which she recognized as a cloud of black mana not unlike the one she had used. Slashes of white were the necrarch and Solfis striking. Slashes of gray were Solar's lethal swipes. The black dots were her allies, wearing their isolating armor. The white blob was the necrarch.

Gods, they were fast.

Already, Sidjin and Arthur were helping, throwing spells and reinforcing the shield. She had to do... something. Ah yes, of course. Solfis had given her instructions.

With an effort of will, Viv yonked the cloud and pulled. There was some meaning there, annihilation with a different flavor than her own, but the necrarch was not in direct control of the cloud and the room progressively lightened. When it did, Viv had a better view of the battle. It was, in a word, breathtaking.

Solfis acted as a flanker, surging forward with flashes of blinding speed to inflict grievous wounds. He moved with absolute confidence, never wasting a moment, never moving a knuckle that did not have to be moved. Irao appeared and disappeared in flashes of darkness, striking deep at their foe's back. With each blow, he left a blade deeply embedded in a bone or an articulation where it would inflict the most damage and where, Viv thought, the necrarch could not reach to easily remove them, but it was Solar who carried the fight.

The blade master was the eye at the heart of the hurricane. He exuded an aura of calm even as his arms moved to repulse attacks that would devastate fortifications and ravage entire cavalry squadrons. He struck with exacting precision. Claws came close to his head, his heart, but they were never allowed to cross that last finger that would make the difference between a hit or miss. His counters dug grooves in the stone and slashes in the flesh of the

horrible creature facing them. The trio was as inspiring as it was deadly, and yet, until Viv lifted the veil, they were not winning.

The necrarch stood in the midst of them and he occupied so much space in the room and in Viv's mind. It existed widely, shockingly. It could not be ignored. Humanoid, it stood over the height of three men, or would have if it were not so hunched. Long horns curved forward over a noseless, disturbingly humanoid face. A jaw layered with needle fangs split its head in two. From then down, the abomination was a gaunt and simian with hands and feet ending in long, wicked claws. It fought with an unsettling mix of dancer's grace and feral fury and each of its attacks left a noxious imprint of black mana behind. In fact, the creature oozed destructive mana from its pallid skin to saturate the air. Only Viv had the means to counter that effectively. Irao and Solar's armor already showed signs of damage despite their inherent properties.

Now that the casters had entered the fray, the battle reached a turning point. Sidjin waited for Irao to appear to throw sharp, transparent edges while the assassin struck. Viv wasn't sure how he managed the timing. As for Arthur, she waited for an errant leg to pass by to spit fire on it.

The necrarch felt that the tide had turned as well. It crouched on itself. A veil of destructive mana surrounded it, pressure building immediately. The fighters stood aside. Solar sheathed his sword and stood still. Viv recognized the skill from outside, but he needed time. Time, and an opening.

The necrarch's attack protected it just as it increased in power, but it was inherently a pressure bomb, and the best way to counter it was to create an outlet.

"Bolt."

Her attack connected with the envelope, barely disturbing its surface before new energy replaced the loss but that was enough to understand how the outer shell was structured. She sent three yinks in three specific points and drained.

It was strange to drain a spell instead of an undead. The mana was just as thick, and yet it felt easier, less personal. The mana in the spell begged to be released. She was merely providing an opportunity.

Pillars of destructive mana hissed out, darkening the room once more yet at the same time the windup to the attack stopped.

The necrarch was not pleased. It roared an ear-shattering screech of outrage and Viv was once again happy to have included a sonic barrier to her shield. However, that was just the beginning.

The necrarch's evil, crimson gaze locked on her.

Suddenly, it was much larger.

Suddenly, it was in front of her, punching.

Its claws were right in front of her face. Viv saw her entire life flash in front of her, but a detail stuck. Solar had completed his attack.

The necrarch put its entire weight in the jab. Its claws hit the shield and stayed there while the monster itself finished turning. Viv realized why. The blademaster had cut its arm clean off, mid-lunge.

She still fell on her ass.

It was too much for the necrarch. With a last woosh of displaced her and a few parting attacks from her allies, it was gone through the tunnel.

Viv finished collapsing, her gloved hands sliding on the wet stone below. She breathed deeply, amazed to be still alive.

"I'm alive! I'm alive.]"

//This did not look like a normal wound.

//Does your skill create lingering wounds?

"Give me a moment, machine, while I contemplate one of the most difficult fights of my long life," Solar replied. He sat on his knees and meditated.

Sidjin approached Viv and patted her shoulder.

"You did well," he whispered.

"I am... processing."

"I believe I understand. I will be here if you need to speak."

"Squee!"

We won!

Yay!

Just as expected.

"You were amazing during the fight!" Viv said, happy for the distraction. "I was so worried but you did so well! You fought the nascent necrarch on equal footing!"

Arthur was left unimpressed by her observations. She aimed her thought with the frayed patience reserved for slow children.

Mother.

Of course.

Am dragon.

Arthur stood to her full height. On her hind legs, her head was now slightly higher than Viv's. Teenager growth spurt, probably.

Those were not tears in Viv's eyes. Just dust and also condensation. The caves were humid, is all.

"My little baby grew up so fast..."

Mother.

No crying in front of your lessers.

"Sowwy."

Viv sniffed away her pride, but still gave the deserved pats. The others were busy recovering and inspecting the battlefield so they had most likely not used their superior senses to eavesdrop. They were gentlemen, after all.

//Your Grace.

//Good news.

"What is it?"

//We have loot.

Viv watched Irao recover a large orb from the remains of one of the fallen. He wordlessly passed it on to Viv.

Monster cores were strange. She felt resistance when clutching the perfect spheres, yet her fingers felt nothing. No temperature, no texture, just an absence of physical feeling. This was offset by the incredible power coursing through the metaphysical construct. The core fixed to her dagger only had a fraction of the reserves in there, and it was not even full.

"Wow."

"You'll need a staff to carry that thing around," Sidjin observed.

"This is a group effort," Viv replied with some regret. "We share the reward."

"Only one of us is a pure black mana caster, and you are also our employer. Normally, the treasure should be yours. Treasures."

Irao brought back an early Christmas present. Two more cores of a similar size to the other. She wasn't sure, but she thought the price of those would be enough to retire a rich woman in any large city. At least a hundred gold talent per piece, easy. Of course, those would not be sold. She had a nice project in mind that would make her heavies protected in battle. Those would be the batteries.

She was juggling them with joy when Solfis spoke.

//Your Grace.

//There is another prize.

Now that the nascent necrarchs were dead, their absence revealed the back of the armory. Little was left of the original weapons save for faded trails of rust along the sheer walls. The chains binding the monsters had disintegrated as well, leaving behind shards of striated black iron. It made the surviving object that much more threatening. Viv approached, watching the grisly weapon with concern.

[Skull mace, artifact. Once used for ritual sacrifice and as a badge of office for the high priest, this potent weapon has been twisted by the death of its creator. Cursed. It is not suitable for use by any naturally-occurring creature of Nyil.]

Before Viv could even think about tricks, a new window opened.

That means you as well for the purpose of defining 'naturally occurring.'

Don't touch it. Even you won't break it easily.

Viv needed that instruction the same way she needed to be told not jump ass first into a volcano. If an aberrant could be an object, it would be the abominable assembly of spikes, twisted bone, and cancerous obsidian this apparatus seemed to be made of. Only a B-movie power-hungry antagonist would touch that horror and hope for anything but to be turned into an ulcer. 'Cursed' was an understatement.

"What the fuck are we supposed to do with that?" she asked no one in particular.

Solfis stepped to the thing, grabbed it, then shoved it into a bag.

//We shall sell it to Elunath, of course.

"Errrrr," Viv replied, a little unsure.

"The good decision would be to bring it to a temple of Neriad to be destroyed," Solar said reproachfully.

//Then let us hope...

//That Elunath will take a good decision.

“You think he’ll buy that thing?”

//Undoubtedly.

//If not out of interest, then out of concern.

//He will never trust you with such a dangerous tool.

“I don’t know, giving a cursed artifact to a powerful, overconfident mage sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

//I estimate he will analyze the mace then destroy it himself.

//In the unlikely event where he is corrupted.

//Note this is below 4%.

//Then his fall will lead to the destruction of Helock.

The room fell silent while Solfis stood there, unfazed.

//Tragic.

//A terrible loss.

“I can notify the temple,” Sidjin said. “If he doesn’t destroy it, they will.”

Solar shrugged.

“As long as it is destroyed, I care little. Sidjin is correct. Elunath would be a fool to keep it, and one has not reached his level of power by being a fool. Let him have it, if it will help Bob survive.”

“Right,” Viv said, “Let’s have a break, then we’re off.”

After taking a minute to recover, the party was ready. Once again, magically reinforced bodies and minds came in clutch. Being surrounded by people on the fourth step or above really drove home how much Nyil turned its more determined denizens into super soldiers. The survivors, in any case. It was not just the ability to cut rock with a sword. Even their mental resilience improved, allowing them to brush off near-death experiences. She wondered what a society with supermen would look in a world like earth. It probably wouldn’t be too great.

“I think we should finish exploring this floor,” Solar said, “I don’t want things to come at our back again.”

//The black mana density here is lower.

//Should the necrarch return while we are here, it would not fight at its maximum potential.

//I believe the decision is sound.

“Right.”

Staying in formation again, they explored the study rooms next. It was a large, open space with pillars set at regular intervals and some alcoves dug into the sheer rock with tables and seats. Viv believed the empty space might have housed a storage space for scrolls or books. Unfortunately, nothing was left of it. Regular openings on one side showed the night sky, partially cloudy. Whoever had dug them had also woven the consumed stone into an overhang, protecting it from most rains. It was cleverly designed for comfort despite the Spartan appearance of stone furniture. Perhaps, a long time ago, this place of study might have been covered in pelts and colorful cloth. She would never know. In any case, only Solfis found something valuable.

//Those inscriptions on the wall show the totality of the ancient glyphs used in their alphabet.

//With a sample that size and by cross-referencing ancient Enorian dialects, I will be able to decipher those texts.

//Eventually.

“This is all fascinating but we have more pressing issues than archeology,” Viv said.

//I do not need time.

//I have saved all the texts to my database.

//We can move on to the last part of the upper floor complex.

//The garden of fertility.

Viv wondered what would be left of the garden, if anything was left at all. The path leading there winded up to what Viv was the secondary, open-air entrance she had spotted from afar. It was bound to have a nice view, at least. She just hoped there wouldn't be any traps.

The party followed the winding stairs leading there. The higher they got, the more certain Viv grew that there was something left.

The first thing that hit them was the smell. A pungent and acid wind hit her nose full on, more chemical and unpleasant than truly revolting. Its cloying intensity pushed Viv to place a tissue in front of her nose.

“Hmm are we being poisoned or something?”

//No airborne toxins detected.

//No mana signature detected.

“So this is a normal smell?”

“Nothing normal about that,” Solar said, “but it won't kill us.”

“I have experienced many fragrances from courtesan-made perfumes to charnel pits, but nothing quite like that,” Sidjin added in a subdued voice.

Stinky.

“Right. If we’re going to do it, let’s do it.”

They climbed more, staying close to the walls. Their silent ascent finished on a landing lit by the light of Nyil’s moon. Solfis went first but he stopped and tilted his head a way Viv did not quite understand. Solar followed and gasped, then Sidjin. Viv hurried to see what was the big deal. She regretted her enthusiasm instantly.

The sacred place around them spread to the edge of the cavern where the roof dropped suddenly into the abyss below. The weather had cleared a bit and with silvery light shining freely over the ‘garden of fertility’, its blasphemous nature was revealed in all its gruesome horror. The garden was a forest linked by patches of vegetation, except, it was all meat. Quivering planes of pinkish flesh like flayed muscle, still oozing blood with every palpitation linked together trunks of bones, leaves of sinew, fleshy fruits of purple tissue that pulsed lymph over the cartilage bark. The field of gore did not stand idle. It beat from a hundred hearts in a quiet cacophony that sent this gigantic mass of meat shivering and moaning, the exposed tibias and humerus creaking under the strain of their nerve-wracked dance, and in the midst of it all, at the base of the tallest tree, there was a single, perfect eye.

As large as a plate, the organ could have made a painter weep. The curve of its lid, the length of its lashes, the perfect, radiant color of its iris spoke of a stupendous beauty made that much more gruesome by the surrounding, grisly display. Viv watched the pupil enlarge but she could not tell if it was surprise, relief, panic, or anger. There was not enough humanity around it to determine anything more than the fact it reacted. The ungodly glare settled on Viv.

An instant later, the iris turned green.

“Oh FUCK no.”

Before Viv could react, Solar screamed and cut. The tree split in two. Phlegm-drenched ichor hit Viv’s boots on its way down. Ropes like intestines, or intestines like rope, shot from the gutted trunk to reunify both parts in a concerto of tortured bones. The eye started to regrow while the shed humor slid from the wound in a viscous mass. Sidjin screamed as well. Fire licked the fetid garden, forcing hisses and spasms, each new wound spitting more liquid until the blaze was smothered. The two men kept attacking the regenerating mass.

//Your Grace.

//Their mind is under attack.

Viv finally perceived it, an insidious strike on her soul. Something crawled and tried to revolt and attract her at the same time. Her soul was strong, however, and her own leadership and mental skills shored up the defenses. She cast a quick analysis on the pulsating mass of flesh.

[Corrupted garden of the jovial pudge. Fallen, living artifact, twisted by the fall of its maker. Extremely dangerous...]

“Wait...” Viv said, “that thing has combat abilities. Guys! Snap out of it!”

“Squeeeee!”

Arthur was less affected, trying to pull back a struggling Sidjin.

“Ok. Enough. Eldritch wall.”

Viv aimed at the edge of the cavern and cast, Tentacles closed all around them. A quick spell blocked the organic dirge of the dying and reborn garden. This left the men sagging against the walls, out of breath.

Viv stood between them and the horror garden, now blocked from sight. She could feel the black and life mana behind settling down.

“Alright, everyone, calm down.”

**//They are going to need a moment.
//Their vitals are returning to normal.
//Well done.**

“You could have pulled them back,” Viv reproached.

**//I apologize, Your Grace.
//I am not equipped to react adequately to unique events.
//I calculated that it was best to leave you the decision on how to proceed.**

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

The two poor lads were breathing hard, their eyes staring in empty space with a thousand yards stare. Or nine hundred and fourteen point four meter. Same thing, Viv thought. It seemed that they were recovering. She hoped they were, because eldritch body-horror-induced madness aside, they were still on the necrarch’s territory.

//In any case, well done for resisting the mental attack.

She had, yes. Viv frowned. That didn’t make sense. Sidjin had better mental stats than her, for sure, and she strongly felt that Solar had soul sense. Both of them had seen some shit in their days. Hell, Sidjin had lived through them. There was little reason why she would resist better than the others.

“Why did it not work on me?” she asked.

//I suspect it may be due to your outlander mindset.

“Should it not be the contrary?”

//Your Grace, you do not see the gods as gods.

//Superior and unattainable.

//You once employed the term 'Immature overgrown manchildren on a power trip'.

Back in the city of the gods, in the Palace of a Thousand doors, a man flipped a page from a book without end.

“Now that’s just rude,” he said.

Then after a moment.

“Although not entirely inaccurate.”

//Your lack of faith in the divine nature of the gods means that the dark ones’ horror has a lesser impact on your psyche.

“You guys going to be alright?” Viv asked.

Solar nodded his head slowly while Sidjin shook is.

“I need a little time. Such abomination. How can you not see it and witness a reflection of your own fallible flesh?”

“Because I don’t need a big monster to remember old age is a thing? Besides, it won’t happen to me. I either die or become immortal, remember?”

Viv wiggled her eyebrows under the scowl of her lover, but Sidjin chuckled a moment later and his shoulders grew just a little less hunched.

“Thank you for grounding me.”

He grabbed her hand, then kissed her lightly.

“I wish Wamiri was here,” Solar grumbled.

“Sorry, I don’t do friends with benefits,” Viv deadpanned.

“That’s not —” Solar sputtered. “Wait. You are trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

“Please do not mention offering sexual favor to colleagues in front of me, dear,” Sidjin pleaded.

“Alright that is quite enough of this. You are all lucky the necrarch didn’t pick this moment to attack.”

Won't!

I am standing guard.

Vigilant dragon!

“How come you were not afraid?” Viv asked.

Lots of meat.

Not fresh, not tasty.

Blegh.

What is scary?

“Nevermind.”

//I suspect our target may not like this place, Your Grace.

Viv wasn't sure. Why would the embodiment of undead body horror not like body horror? Speaking of, was that a living artifact? How could that happen?

“It said ‘corrupted garden of the jovial pudge. Does that mean anything to you?’ she asked.

//I have formulated a hypothesis.

//This was an altar to Gomogog.

“Aaaaah. Yeah. Clearly,” Viv said, remembering the specific mix of black and life mana Kazar tower's cook had displayed, an eternity ago. It was the same blend as what the horrid artifact had shown.

//I suspect Gomogog may not have always been a dark god.

This shocked Solar and Sidjin, sending the two in a new episode of stupor.

“Please stop distracting them,” Irao asked.

“Nghah!” Viv screamed. “I forgot you were here, sorry.”

“I was hiding.”

“Ugh I'll never get used to this. Anyway, Gomogog, not a dark god from the start. Wait, so the statues below...”

//The huntress with spider traits represents Octas, the Spider Queen.

//The fat man is Gomogog.

**//The destroyed statue is of unknown nature, perhaps Efestar, the God of Scorn.
//The bloated one, I would not know.
//And you already recognized Enttiku.**

“Wait, so Enttiku did not fall but the others did?”

**//Perhaps.
//Those are all conjectures at this point.**

“Anything we can use against the necrarch?”

**//My algorithm returns no viable tool.
//But perhaps you can think of something.**

Viv considered the question for a moment.

“Do necrarchs retain memories from their time alive?”

**//It would be better to say that they regain some.
//Natural necrarchs can speak the language they had while they were alive.
//Although they do not seem capable of discussion, only soliloquy.
//It is difficult to assess the intelligence level of a necrarch, due to a small sample size.
//And the fact that they are deadly and irredeemably evil.**

“What, if the necrarch was originally a human who lived here?” Viv asked. “I mean, one of the original dwellers, not an invader. That would explain why it did not move to the deadlands.”

“It could also be due to its territoriality,” Sidjin said.

“Well, no matter what, I got an idea.”

“How about we talk about it downstairs? I don’t want to stay next to that thing,” Solar replied.

It was agreed that the proximity of what Viv judged to be a David Cronenberg wet dream wasn’t exactly conducive to a good discussion. The party reconvened near the armory.

“So, the original goal was to slowly corner it, but I think we can bypass that with a proper lure. If it’s one of the original dwellers, then it might take offense if we desecrate its territory like the invaders did.”

The rest of the party didn’t seem impressed.

“What makes you think it’s not an invader?” Solar asked.

“Because they won. The place was sacked and abandoned. They even defaced the directional signs. And winners bury their dead, especially here, on Nyil. Whatever corpse turned into this necrarch did not receive a proper funeral.”

That seemed to sway them a bit.

“Assuming it was indeed an original dweller and not, say, a scavenger killed by a trap or simply an adult necrarch migrating to a suitable den, if we do come up with something it hates, how can we use it to our advantage?”

“We draw it in a place that only has one way out, then seal the exit. That way, it can’t retreat to heal.”

“It also means that we back it into a corner and then fight to the death,” Solar observed. “That will make it even more deadly.”

//I surmise it is preferable to attrition against a necrarch.

//That is where most of its advantages lay.

“Let’s explore downstairs a bit more. Ideally, we want a long corridor with an exit at the end in case we need to flee.”

“We can use the armory again,” Sidjin said.

Viv considered that option. It was a dead end, however. It meant they would be trapped in the dark with the necrarch. She shared her concerns, but Sidjin had a solution ready.

“I’ll set a spell to collapse the floor in case we need to evacuate. I will prepare it in a way that any of the casters can activate it, should I perish in the fight.”

“But there is nothing to desecrate in the armory,” Irao observed.

Viv frowned. He was right. The necrarch would be offended if she started to go after the statues or some other significant landmark, but the statues were in a wide cavern. She didn’t think it would be a good idea to go after the garden again, since that thing could kill them. Perhaps there was another way?

“I have another idea. Instead of desecrating, we could consecrate.”

“Uh?”

“That means, let me pray for a while.”

The in-between.

Soul mastery had not led her to that strange space. Instead, it had placed her in a state of calm that had brought her to the edge. From there, gentle hands had plucked her consciousness from this reality to drag her into the infinite expanse of non-existence, where time and space were not laws but tricks her mortal mind used to interpret what she

perceived. Once more, she stood small and bubbling next to the planet-size existence that was Neriad, the soft glow of its presence twisting the fabric around it. Another planet approached. While Neriad was gold like a dawn sun, this one was blue and deep, deeper than an ocean, a little cold as well. The darkness was a presence and a mask, not the absence of the void. While Neriad protected, this one hid and taunted. There was a drop, and she was sitting at a table in a small glasshouse, flowers blooming all around.

Viv inspected her surroundings. This was reality, but she was not present here. Not really. Viv felt no need to move to take the steaming cup of tea waiting in the white, round table in front of her. Exquisite glass windows led to the outside, showing only blue sky and distant clouds. It was broad daylight here though night had fallen on most of Param. Strange architecture grew to her right where the place she was in — was it a city? — continued.

There were two men sitting with her.

The first was Neriad, easily recognizable from his aura. He was a tall man clad in golden chain and plate armor with a beard and long flowing hair. His face was handsome in an old playboy sort of way, with small crow feet and a hint of gray at the temple that lent him an air of respectability. His posture inspired calm and power. Viv looked briefly into the golden orb of molten fire of his eyes before averting her gaze. He smiled at her with gentle warmth.

The other was a man with dark hair, exotic traits, in a long blue robe that screamed ‘war mage’. He was taller than Neriad yet slimmer, and just as focused. His eyes were shifting nebulae of the deepest indigo. Viv did not manage to focus on them for more than an instant. Viv knew who it was, again from the aura. This was Maradox, the God of Secrets, one of her protectors.

“This place brings back memories,” Neriad finally said in a soft basso.

“We should have excavated them. I did warn Emeric.”

Neriad shrugged.

“Just like you to say ‘I told you so’ millenia after the fact. You know who to aim your recriminations at.”

“How convenient for him to disappear to avoid this fate.”

“Yes. Lucky, is it not?”

Neriad chuckled but Maradox scowled. Eventually, the God of Secrets turned his attention to Viv.

“We are inclined to assent to your request, although you do not deserve this service from us, having not dedicated your existence to our worship.”

“Saying unkind words!” Neriad added.

“Stop eavesdropping,” Viv thought very hard at them.

She did not have a voice and her thoughts were hard to express and aim in a clear way. Nevertheless, she perceived the humor in the expressions of the god and expected she would get away with the tiny jab. She was proven correct.

“We are gods. It comes with certain perks,” Neriad admitted. “What my pompous friend is saying is that we messed up and you’ll have to clean for us, so we’ll do you a solid and assist as we can.”

“But bear in mind that this is a one off. There is a price to dealing with us. One we will mostly wave, except for one small detail. You will keep what you learn secret.”

“The others though...”

“You are not the only one who will learn or has learned the truth. What I demand is that you do not share this with your adopted people. Your voice is loud on Nyil, louder than many mortals. You will keep this knowledge out of your teachings.”

“The knowledge that you were the ones who razed that temple?”

The two gods smirked.

“Yes, and the rest as well.”

“You were humans then,” Viv said.

“We were. All of us were.”

The realization struck Viv as... incredible. If they had done it, then...

“You already see us as... anthropomorphized beings, prone to mortal flaws. A consequence of your upbringing, I suppose. What you have learned now is that we were humans long ago. This and the rest, you must keep quiet. The order we promote becomes more brittle with every person who thinks they, too, can become us. That we are no better than them. We are. We achieved the impossible on many levels. I also assure you that our revolt was necessary and that we were the first successes in a long, long line of failures. Civilization rose with us. It is not as stable as one may think.”

“Before we struck the old pantheon, humans lived in caves and hid in trees. We were the scavengers of this world, fighting the beastlings for leftovers. Our struggle took centuries. Do not belittle our efforts, outlander.”

“Did not mean to insult,” Viv thought.

Out of all the gods, those two were alright. She thought that very hard and let them see her true feelings.

“Thank you, child,” Neriad said. “Now return and pray to us.”

“And remember that your prayer is a binding agreement that you will not share what you learn. If you break that oath, I will shatter your soul.”

“Understood,” Viv said. “That’s fine by me. I’m not trying to cause a godly revolution.”

Her vision faded, but not before hearing a last amused comment from Maradoc.

“I used to say that as well.”

Soul Mastery: Beginner 4

“You just... fell asleep?” Sidjin asked in disbelief when Viv opened her eyes again.

“I got the green light. Meaning I got approval to start, but first we must set up the trap. How long until the next attack?”

//Ten minutes at most before full arm regrowth.

Viv turned to Sidjin.

“I’ll make it work,” he said.

The party returned to the armory. Viv set a semi-permanent light enchantment since it was dark and she didn’t want to have to focus on anything else but the fight. Sidjin prepared a hole in the ground spell to allow people to jump down to the level below, should all else fail, which took him only moments. Viv wondered how he knew the spell so well, but his haunted expression hinted that it would be a sad memory.

After that, Sidjin set a two-level trap. The first would collapse the tunnel behind the necrarch while the second would set up a grinder spell to stop it from digging.

“The spell denies area to several weak monsters, not a single strong one,” the mage lamented. “I made a few modifications on the fly but it will only slow it down. The necrarch’s resistance to magic has already been proven.”

“That’s fine. Even if the trap fails, so long as we do significant damage, the investment will have been worth it.”

//We need to set the trap now, Your Grace.

//Or the creature will have the time to come up with new tricks to harass us.

“Understood. I’ll start right away.”

Viv sat in a lotus position in the middle of the armory, on the cold ground. She took an instant to engrave the shield of Neriad and the symbol of Maradoc, which was a vault gate, on the ground. It only seemed proper.

“Right. Maradoc, Neriad, you have watched over us for thousands of years. I ask for your support once more. Please shine your light on this forsaken place and place a beacon for all that is good, so we may finish what you started.”

Viv hesitated, her catholic-trained mind naturally going for ‘amen’. It just didn’t feel right.

Besides, it was unnecessary. Her prayer had been heard.

Blue and golden light surged from the symbols, bathing the naked stone in an otherworldly light. Viv sighed in contentment, realizing that the cloud of anxiety-inducing black mana had dispersed in this place for the first time in eons. The light grew and made her spell redundant, but she didn’t mind. It was beautiful.

The humans present relaxed. Even Irao briefly reappeared to shake his shoulders. Arthur huffed, then put her snout next to the golden halo, thoughtful.

The most horrible screech Viv had ever heard shook the very mountain. A blast of malevolent black mana joined the sound attack but were dispersed by the mages’ protection backed by divine favor. This time, it was different. The necrarch’s yell did not convey the same malice and hatred as before. This time, it spoke of the maddest rage, the most insane fury. It told Viv that the hole Sidjin had prepared would be of no use, no use at all.

Either they killed it, or it would kill them. Right now.

“Guys, I think it worked!”