

They left the next day after a cold breakfast and mugs of warm klod. Their path led through the empty valleys. The cave happened out of nowhere. Only flag planted by a previous expedition differentiated the small hill that hid their target from the other ones.

Viv looked at cave entrance. It was square and reinforced by a solid blocks of stone. It looked like it could endure for millenia.

**//This is the remnant of an underground mushroom farm.**

Viv turned to Solfis, surprised that he would talk.

“Ah, so your golem can speak. I was wondering why you would carry it around,” Farren said, while nodding to himself.

“What else can you tell us?” Viv asked.

**//My database indicates that the structure will lead underground, with several caverns linked by a network of tunnels.**

**//Some of all of the tunnels may have collapsed.**

**//Depending on the size of the installation, the farm could have anywhere between three and seven chambers.**

**//Larger farms would have a larger entrance.**

“I see. How convenient!” Farren continued, “your golem is a knowledge depository! As expected.”

“That he is,” Viv confirmed, “now, we have a large structure to clear. I propose that we proceed as such: we park the sled here with the horse, then circle around to clear revenants because I don’t want anything on my tail when we clear the cave. Then, we go in slowly. Marruk first with the shield with me behind to provide cover. Farren, you watch our six. Everyone agreed?”

“I go first,” Marruk confirmed, and she banged a large fist against her door, errr, shield.

“What’s a six?” Farren asked.

“Our back. You watch our back.”

“How does it relate to six?”

Viv pinched the bridge of her nose. Did they even have watches? She hadn’t seen watches. Farren had asked them to be there ‘half a period after sunrise’.

“Nevermind. You cover my back. Clear?”

“What about your beast? The marsh drake.”

“...”

“...”

“Moral support?”

“You brought her for moral support?”

Viv glared at Farren, who bounced nervously from foot to foot.

“Look, she imprinted on me so she is sticking with me and can defend herself, but she’s still far too young. Got it?”

“Alright, alright, it’s your mission.”

“Yes, so, we clear on the formation?”

“Yes.”

“I will be your shield!”

“Ok, now for the plan. We go to the entrance and make some noise. The entrance can be used as a chokepoint. We stay there until nothing attacks us, then move in. Rinse and repeat in every tunnel. If a room leads to two different tunnels besides the entrance one we will advise. Got it?”

“I make noise on your command, shaman!” Marruk claimed. Then, her eyes clouded a bit.

“I mean, witch.”

“It’s fine. We start by sweeping the perimeter, errr, the space around the cave. Come on!”

Viv directed Marruk to open the way. They took fifteen minutes to strut around and take down the stragglers. Viv let Farren purify the remains of those Marruk had bashed down. The Kark woman fought with simple, economic movements. Her vertical strikes with the mass showed that she had a lot of power. Viv thought that she might never forget the repetitive crunch of crumpled spines for the rest of her life.

Eventually, they made their way back to the entrance, and Marruk stood there looking like a one-woman wall. The entrance was large enough for three strong people to walk abreast, yet somehow, the lone defender seemed to occupy the whole space. She looked back and received a confirmation nod from Viv.

The clang of metal on metal resonated ominously in the enclosed space.

Viv felt something coming, though she heard nothing.

Marruk looked back with a raised brow.

“Another?”

“No! They are coming. Eyes forward.”

The Kark woman blushed furiously.

### Danger Sense: Beginner 3

Good, and not a moment too soon. Viv heard a gurgle and reacted automatically.

“Black shield.”

A half-circle of void materialized before their vanguard, and the gut spiller’s bile crashed on it with a vicious hiss.

“Gut spiller, be ready,” Viv said. She dropped the shield as soon as the attack was over.

A large specimen was charging at Marruk, arm extended. Viv took a step to the side just as Marruk slammed up and to the side with her door. The massive weapon wooshed through the air as if it weighted nothing, easily batting the powerful arm aside. It was back in position before their foes had the time to take a step back. Its malevolent glare, black where Solfis’ was yellow, shone in the pallid light of the sun. Briefly.

“Yoink.”

The creature collapsed in itself in a shower of dark ash.

“More of them. Hold.”

A horde of revenants soon followed. Viv held back a bit just to see how Marruk would fare against the onslaught.

Pretty well as it turned out.

Again, Marruk's style was economical, barely letting any part of her body emerge from the shield's powerful defenses. Skulls were smashed, bodies were bashed, and attacks were interrupted with a perfect sense of timing that spoke of skill and experience both. Viv watched her as for a handful of seconds, Marruk killed. Savaged remains piled at her feet.

"True mass yoink."

Viv shivered as powerful mana filled her conduit. Once again, her body was singing with the power that coursed through it just as she knew that it would eventually kill her. It did not matter right now.

They waited a bit. Only a shuffling revenant with no legs crawled forward, quickly slain. He had been too slow to keep up with the rest of the bulk.

"Move to the entrance to the next cavern. Steady."

Marruk grunted and moved forward. They walked into the side of the cliff, darkness closing around them until Farren lifted an arm.

"Neriad, be the light in our time of need."

A golden aura shone outward from all three, wait no, four participants.

"Squeee!"

"When did she get there?" Farren asked. Viv remained silent as the dragonling climbed on her shoulder and flapped once to stabilize herself. Viv now had a shoulder-mounted, self-propelled dragon, and that was cool as cucumber.

"Focus," she ordered everyone including herself, "we are there. Marruk, bang once."

The door clanged once more. Nothing stirred in the darkness. The cave before them was square and obviously man-made. Whatever furnitures or equipment had been used was long gone. Only the ever-present dust piled in the corners. The light around them easily shone across the space to show a decidedly target-poor environment.

"Hmmm."

There were two passages heading further. One of them was completely obstructed. The other one showed signs of excavation.

"Forward and left. Stop at the entrance of the tunnel."

Another grunt. They moved slowly with Viv standing back and to the side. She saw that the excavation had been made by something with sharp claws, and large hands. At least four to five times the size of human ones.

Viv looked at the tracks and thought to herself: 'Well, that's not—

Something surged from the darkness and struck Marruk as Viv hastened her thoughts. By some supreme instinct, the Kark woman managed to angle the door to deflect a vicious swipe that sent sparks flying. The odious shriek of tortured steel rang like thunder on a blue sky. Meanwhile, Viv was already moving.

A spear of pure darkness shot forward, thick as a forearm. The overcharged spell stabbed at the attacker... and missed.

The spear, still linked to Viv's closed fist, angled up and right. It struck an arm. Viv felt as much as saw a humanoid form covered in plates, half crawler and half... something else.

She connected and flooded the creature's conduits. They were titanic. After hundreds of victims, killing with yoink had been like exploding a balloon with the stream from a garden hose. Now, it was like filling a tub.

And she did.

Without thought, overwhelming power invaded the creature's network, claiming the black and making it hers. The color sang in her core and in her mind, eager to carry out her will. It rampaged through the foreign conduits without restraint. The dire violation sent a tremor through the attacked limb. A second spell lashed out just as the target was retreating.

The creature seized the captured arm and ripped it off. It used the severed limb to intercept the second spell and ran backward, just as Marruk's mace whistled through the air. The amputated arm turned to ash.

Then the creature was gone.

"Orrak Makthun!"

"Neriad's cock..."

"Bordel de merde."

"Squeeeee!"

As one man, the living visitors of the cave expressed their dismay. Farren and Viviane swore the loudest.

[Nascent Necrarch: Extremely dangerous, this creature is in the process of evolving into a Necrarch, the most powerful of all natural undead. Although weakened during the transformation, it remains a supremely dangerous existence, capable of clawing through heavy armor.]

The golden sheen around Marruk's shield had faded. In its stead, four diagonal tracks had sliced through wood and reinforced steel alike. Only the dense structure of the door knocker had held long enough to prevent the Kark woman from having her arm shredded.

"What. In Enttikku's hallowed name. Was that?" Marruk asked in a clipped voice. She was breathing heavily, and Viv suspected that her uncanny parry had come at the cost of stamina.

Farren took a step back and sat heavily.

"That is the apex existence of the deadlands in the making. A nascent Necrarch. I don't think we can defeat it, despite Bob's timely spells. Well done, by the way. I thought we were done for, for sure."

"It was closer than I hoped. Are we going after that thing?"

**//Before you continue this discussion, we may want to solve the current problem.**

Three people jumped a bit, then Farren swore when he realized that Solfis was standing at their back, as if he had been there all along. He was near the entrance, slightly to the side.

"When did you get here?" Viv asked.

**//At the same time as him, Your Grace.**

Solfis' yellow glare turned to the side, where there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

"You'd better show yourself, Irao."

A shape emerged from the wall. Well, not literally. Before there was a wall, and now there was a shape. Viv could scarcely believe her eyes as they processed what could only be qualified as a fucking ninja.

Really.

Black armor wrapped around a thin, lanky build. It looked like a person, if a slightly anorexic one. And just a little crooked. In fact, every aspect of the man disturbed Viv at a fundamental level. His proportions skirted the edge of human limits, and she found herself taking a step back.

[Obfuscated: your inspection skill is being blocked.]

That didn't bode well.

Farren precluded any complaint by waving his hand.

"Not a danger, nothing will happen as long as I am not harmed. Everybody, stay calm."

Marruk kept her shield angled towards where the undead abomination had disappeared, but it was clear that she was feeling ambivalent about the whole bullshit and her frantic eyes jumped from one deadly thing to another.

"Squee!"

Viv patted Arthur's chest and decided to act decisively.

"Marruk watch the tunnel. Block it with your shield."

The Kark woman nodded and approached the opening with Viv as backup. The value of the door proved itself when it was used as an actual door. The way was blocked. The nascent Nearch would have to ram through it and Marruk's sturdy frame to escape. Viv made sure to stay around.

"Okay. Farren, who, what, and why?"

"Irao is here for my protection. He will only act to defend me. Won't you Irao?"

The shape's attention was fixed on Solfis who was not moving at all. Only Viv knew that the Golem's reserves were very low and that even idleness was too dangerous to sustain.

The silence grew uncomfortable.

"Irao is fine, I promise. He is not... the best with people. I suggest that both him and... your... is that truly a golem?"

**//I am Solfis, little man.**

**//You may think that you are protected by your assassin friend.**

**//You are wrong.**

**//Tricks and deceptions are of no use against me.**

**//TRY ME, AND DIE.**

“Perhaps it would be best if the two of you waited by the sled,” Viv suggested. Now was not the time for explanations.

“Okay so yes, Irao is an assassin, but I swear on Neriad’s name that I did not intend to hurt you in any way. He is just insurance.”

Huh. It was really unambiguous as far as oaths were concerned. Viv shook her head.

“Fine, but we can talk later. For now, fall back. We won’t be long.”

“A nascent ravager is a dangerous adversary, even with your abilities, Bob.”

“I don’t intend to face it.”

“Ah, of course. Naturally, I would not expect you to assault such a foe in its very lair.”

“Ah, nah. What I mean is that I don’t intend to walk down there. Solfis, how deep would you say that thing goes?”

**//From the blocked off right-hand cavern entrance, I can extrapolate the following statement.**

**//The nascent necrarch has dug a path that is no less than ten paces, and no more than twenty paces deep.**

“Just the right size then. Marruk, cover me. And you guys fuck off.”

Viv was about to send a blight that would go through that tunnel like a laxative through a big intestine. Shit would get real.

“Can I stay and watch, please? We will behave. I swear it on Neriad.”

“Ok then. Solfis, stand down, and you? Shut the fuck up.”

Solfis returned to his more compact form and Farren stepped back to the entrance with his secret bodyguard or something in tow. It was time for Viv to violate the Geneva Convention on the use of chemical weapons and, by God, she was looking forward to it.

Strands of Black mana gathered in front of her core. She could have made it appear in her hand but it made no difference and she found it fancier. The orb grew to the size of a tennis ball, both incredibly dense and weightless. She infused it with the idea of destruction. It had become easier to do, and she was tempted to add another rune than just spread. She refrained, however. Now was not the time to experiment. Instead, she charged it as much as she could. Soon, her breath hastened under the pressure of the spell. Her head tingled. It was time.



“Blight.”

Just like last time, the globe of darkness expanded into an impenetrable cloud that covered the entire tunnel. A furious hiss soon surrounded Viv as the deleterious mana scathed the walls on its way down.

Marruk voiced her worries.

“How do we know if something something dead?” she asked. Viv could not understand the words she had used, but she got the gist of it and soon, Marruk had her answer.

They heard a roar of anger, then a shriek of pain, then silence for a few seconds. The shriek resumed, turned frantic. Finally, there was an ear-splitting, maddening trill that ended into a gurgled whisper. When silence finally descended a moment later, no one reacted.

“Should we check if it’s dead?” Farren asked in a small voice.

“It’s dead,” his companion commented drily. He had a raspy voice, as if his throat had been damaged by smoke.

Without a word, the assassin walked back to the entrance and disappeared out. Solfis tracked something Viv could not see for a few moments, then his eyes dimmed.

“Wow. I had no idea someone so early on her path could unleash such devastation.”

Viv wheeled around like a dervish, her gaze now drilling through Farren’s apologetic expression.

“Ok, enough bullshit. Explanation time. Why was there an assassin on my back?”