

How to be dead

"Can we be certain that it is the same beast?" Alexa's voice was barely a whisper; she found the ossuary deeply intimidating, the presence of the dead, so many bones. Knowing that most of those interred here had been violent killers, infused with the power of a sovereign, sent cold shivers down her spine.

Fighting unliving horrors in the woods and hills was one thing; being reminded of the skeleton inside her quite so immediately was a different matter.

"The Grandmaster is," said Maya. "It's there for all to see. The Braying Lord. The same beast that subverted those fools at Isemer, back again. In Temeschwar this time."

"Not just Temeschwar," muttered Alexa darkly. "Might as well say it is in Wintermark, or Navarr, or... or the Marches. What does it want with those places? Why would it be there?"

"I don't know," said Maya candidly. She ran her fingers over the bones embedded in the walls. Human thighbones. Dozens of them. In stark contrast to Alexa, she took comfort in knowing they were all accounted for, that the dead were at rest. And, she mused darkly, even if one of them were to rise again, it would struggle to put itself back together. As with many traditional Varushkan ossuaries, the bones of everyone lying here were separated by type. "Does it matter?"

They paused at the entrance to the final chamber.

"But what would SHE want with those places? They are so far away from Miekarova. From the Razors. Surely she has no interest in those people? I mean the Schlacta of Rot I can understand I suppose, but Marchers?"

"Who knows what SHE has an interest in," said Maya shortly. "The other day Mikkael and Timori said that a bone centipede

attacked them on the road. On the road, Alexa. I think it is far past time for us to stop trusting in things we have taken for granted."

She swung the lightstone around the little chamber. Dozens and dozens of empty eye sockets stared back at her, unseeing. The walls were covered in niches, each containing a single skull from one of those who died at Isemer. It was the sworn duty of the Fellowship of the Black Goose to keep watch over them, just as they kept watch over the ruins of the old town itself.

Alexa found it first, the mark indicating the niche they were looking for. Shorn of flesh and skin, the skull was indistinguishable from those around it, but the younger warden fancied she could feel a grim malevolence radiating from it. Maya took it down carefully, reverently almost. Alexa frowned to see this relic of a very bad man handled so respectfully. The older warden marked her look and raised a finger in admonishment.

"Never forget that every single one of these people was a person, once, before they let weakness turn them into a monster. They're lost to us now, but once upon a time they listened to stories at their grandmother's knee just as you did. Played in the sun, sang by the fire. Remember that what happened to them, could happen to us. Me. You. Any of our fellows above waiting for us to come back with this bleak treasure. And if it can happen to us who learn the dangers when we are too small to reach a door handle, imagine how it is with people from softer lands? Hmm?"

The younger warden hung her head, chastened.

"You were a feckless fool in life, Alexi Iskandrova Isembrioch." Maya addressed the skull sternly. "A waster, and a thief who sacrificed everything on the alter of their own selfish ambition. You became a monster, and were dealt with as a monster should

be dealt with. But maybe, just maybe, you can do some good at last."

She dropped the skull into the sack, and the two wardens turned to leave.

"Maybe some of us should go to Temeschwar. Deal with the problem?" Alexa suggested after a few moments of silent walking.

"We have duties here," said Maya, not unkindly. "Given everything that is going on, now is worst possible time for us to leave Isemer. We'll just have to trust that the Grandmaster knows what they are about, and trust to others to deal with this particular evil. Maybe they'll even learn something from it."

But her expression, hidden from her companion by the shadow of her hood, was nowhere near as confident as her words.

Overview

Last season the grandmaster of the Shattered Lantern received a report from members of their order on the nature of the threat within Lorenzo's Deep Pockets. Though the full report has not been made available to all citizens of the Empire - as befits the manifesto of the order - other members of the Conclave were informed, leading to the grandmaster of the Rod and Shield taking action. The grandmaster directed the Rod and Shield to march to the sinkhole and deal with the threat posed by the Braying Lord, an elder plaguewolf.

In the Depths

A Greater Plaguewolf Terrorizes Lorenzo's Deep Pockets: Poisoning the mine, raising wights, killing Imperial Citizens. The Shattered Lantern has called for support to deal with this

threat to Hahnmark, Temeschwar, Miaren and Upwold. I call the Rod and Shield to Arms! We march to Lorenzo's Deep Pockets. Find the Braying Lord and End this Threat

*Grandmaster Sakari Nightscale, Rod and Shield. 386YE
Summer Solstice*

We are familiar with the beast that builds its nest in Lorenzo's Deep Pockets. We know it. We know its kind. With vigilance we ask citizens of Varushka to lend our steel and our wisdom to the Rod and Shield, to help fight the malice of this greater plaguewulf

*Vasilimir Radovanovich Esskiviz, Varushkan Assembly,
Summer Solstice 386YE, Vote: Greater Majority (216-0)*

- Members of the Rod and Shield gave explored Lorenzo's Deep Pockets and uncovered the terrible extent of the corruption there
- The Braying Lord is a Greater Plaguewulf, a terrible servant of the sovereign known as the Howling Queen
- The creature is dug in and shows every sign of becoming even more powerful with potentially disastrous ramifications for the north-west Empire

Magicians from across the Empire accept the call from their grandmaster. Hundreds of veteran battlemages journeying to Polseg, the secluded mining settlement that was tormented by the Company of the Torch a year ago. At the same time, supplies are delivered from the other territories that border the sinkhole; Hahnmark, Miaren, and Upwold. Here too are some of the mercenaries readying to explore the depths to claim precious ingots and mana crystals from Lorenzo's Deep Pockets. A few weeks after the Summer Solstice the force moves in strength to establish a base camp and start to investigate what is happening.

The sinkhole has become incredibly dangerous; whereas before the natural caves and tunnels were safe to walk they have become slick with rotten effluence. The damp air hangs heavy with sickness, an occasional draft from below brings the smell of decay, a stench of something wrong. Over the first day, every member of the expedition falls ill; a feeling of wrongness, of bone tiredness interspersed with periods of feverish intensity. If it was just that it would be fine, if costly, but the first to receive treatment don't appear to get better. Marrowort helps at least stave off the worst of the fatigue and the fever, at least for a time, but it always returns.

The creatures slinking in the darkness are the other complication. This is a completely different threat to that of the trogoni when the Runic Hearth of Adamant was escorted down to the darkest depths. These monsters in the dark possess a cunning; striking then withdrawing just long enough for the physicks to reach the downed before striking once again. It is during one of these attacks that the other danger of the sickness comes to light as the first casualty - a veteran warden - falls beyond the reach of the healers, the rest of the party forced to watch as the seconds to reach her run out. And then with a judder, she gets back up and begins striking mercilessly at her former friends and allies who put her down a final time with tears in their eyes. This has been seen before, in Iseember, more than two years ago when Boyar Alexi Iskandrova Isembrioch was defeated and the dark horror that made its lair under Iseember confronted.

This revelation propels the expedition into a push downward, to try to roust the beast before more fall to its sickening miasma. Warcasters and war-witches ready themselves alongside knights from Dawn and heroes from Wintermark. It starts with the momentum that comes when thousands of soldiers and powerful magicians are forced to wait whilst sick. When

unleashed they force themselves downwards like an unstoppable wave, devastating the groups of husks they come across. As the expedition reaches the largest cavern yet, the fate of the lost miners and guards - long since thought dead - is finally revealed. Huddled in the centre of the vast cave are scores of malnourished and desperate people. The force quickly establishes guards at the dozen entrances to the cavern and the leaders and healers reach out to help the sick and lost. But not all of the guards and miners were lost, some of them had struck some hard bargain with the Braying Lord and now they strike. Hidden weapons, often daggers but sometimes just sharpened splinters of rock, are embedded quickly in stomachs and throats. Those they manage to take down quickly bolster their own numbers - all of them are eventually subdued but the fighting is rough with more than a hundred lost in those frantic minutes.

Some of the people rescued are able to tell more about the situation; about how some of those taken have fallen to worshipping the Braying Lord, about the mercenary company - the Crimson Band - that has accepted the bargain offered by the Braying Lord. This information - though it came at a heavy cost - is incredibly vital and allows a plan to form. The company and the band of followers are elsewhere - encamped in Hahnmark and Miaren respectively. A flurry of letters are sent to the prognosticators in Anvil and, with knowledge of conjunctions of the Sentinel Gate, a plan begins to form. The lair of the plaguewulf itself is far deeper than the expedition has managed so far with thousands of husks between them and the Braying Lord. But a couple of the battlemages are part of the Fellowship of the Black Goose, the warden fellowship who watch over Isember and were inspired to action by the statement of Vasilimir Radovanovich Esskiviz in the Varushkan Assembly, and they have sent a letter of their own to those who

have remained behind in Karsk.

The mercenaries and the cultists will need to be defeated first. One of the Varushkan battlemages who spoke to the rescued miners reports that they will have taken a similar role as the Boyar of Isemer; as a conduit for the decay of the elder plaguewulf. Once they have been killed then the Braying Lord can be drawn out and killed.

It is risky, and elder plaguewulfs are notoriously difficult to kill. But this is the best chance anyone has had in the last century to kill one.

Conjunctions

- Three opportunities exist to try and stem the flow of corruption from the sinkhole
- Anyone venturing to the area will be exposed to the manifest corruption of the greater plaguewulf and automatically suffer a lethal traumatic wound
- Defeating enemies on these skirmishes offers no guarantee they will stay down

All three of these skirmishes will take place in areas where the foul taint of the Braying Lord has sunk into the ground itself. Every character who passes through the gate will suffer the effects of venom which cannot be cured until back in Anvil. They will also receive a traumatic wound detailing the effects of exposure and should take a moment to familiarise themselves with it.

During these skirmishes, some of the dead will reanimate after a short time. There are many steps that you can take to protect yourself from this peril, but please don't disarm the dead. The unliving minions of the elder plaguewulf are perfectly capable

of inflicting serious injuries with their bare hands but bare handed combat is not part of Empire's rules. It is fine to SHATTER weapons with the appropriate call, but don't take the weapons away from downed monsters because in-character that would achieve little.

Likewise, there are no rules for chopping corpses up in Empire. Execution is one thing, but removing limbs completely is laborious and ineffective against the living dead. You will be wasting time pretending to chop arms and legs or heads off the fallen as this isn't going to stop them standing back up again. By all means use calls like CLEAVE and IMPALE to disable monsters in the fight, but please embrace the conventions of the scene and don't waste your time roleplaying chopping up bodies.

A Sudden Chill

- The followers of the Braying Lord can be removed as a threat through the Sentinel Gate
- This skirmish is a combat highly likely encounter
- The Grandmaster of the Rod and Shield is responsible for killing the followers of the plaguewulf

The followers of the Braying Lord are a threat that spreads beyond the sinkhole itself. Miners, guards, and adventurers who were taken by the plaguewulf and chose to worship it in return for being allowed to live. They will spread the foul nature of the Braying Lord elsewhere, even if the creature itself is destroyed. They seek to disappear into the great mass of Imperial citizenry, to bide their time before emerging again as a new threat. It is entirely possible that if enough of them escape they will inflict a festering wound on the Empire, potentially laying the seeds for a threat like that posed by the bandits of Isemer. They left the

sinkhole before the Rod and Shield moved in; going south into Goldglades, but where they might go from there is impossible to resist - if they reach the Blood Red Roads they could end up almost anywhere, ready to spread the unholy taint of the plaguewulfs or their terrible mistress, the sovereign known as the Howling Queen.

The magicians of the order have asked that the Grandmaster of the Rod and Shield, Sakari Nightscale, be responsible for bringing justice to the followers of the Braying Lord to kill them before they have a chance to reach the roads of Miaren and spread the sickness of the elder plaguewulf.

A Bitter Thought

- The Crimson Band are vulnerable to a strike through the Sentinel Gate
- This skirmish is a combat highly likely encounter
- The Imperial Huntsmarshall is responsible for slaying the Crimson Band

The Crimson Band are a company of dangerously skilled mercenaries. They have made made camp in Wood Heath and are clearly planning to expand the Braying Lord's influence. If they are left free they will head further north and east, and disappear into the wilds of Hahnmark. In their path is the village of Stormshall, and once word of their presence reaches them, they send word to Maggie Potts, the Imperial Huntsmarshall, asking them to deal with these servants of a foul monstrous beast. Given the mercenaries are almost certainly infused with aberrant power by their master, it seems only appropriate that they be responsible for the task.

If the Crimson Band survive, regardless of whether the Braying Lord is destroyed or not they will be able to find sanctuary in

Hahnmark and spread the foul taint of the plaguewulfs into Wintermark. As experienced fighters, they could do a lot of damage if they are given time to gather their strength - and some of the mystics have had unsettling dreams that leave some worried that the Crimson Band might give rise to a horror like the Deadwood Knight if they are not dealt with quickly.

Under the Dust

- The Braying Lord can be lured out and killed
- This skirmish is a combat highly likely encounter
- The Delver of the Depths is responsible for defeating the Braying Lord

Then there is the elder plaguewulf itself, the Braying Lord. This creature has nested within the sinkhole since it fled the ruins of Iseember, and the awful sickness hanging over the great quarry is its doing. The Fellowship of the Black Goose, the warden fellowship who are the self appointed guardians of Iseember, have sent a treasure - the skull of Alexi Iskandrova Isembrioch - to the current Delver of the Depths.

The warden fellowship ask that Piera di Sarvos be responsible for taking the skull to the place where the Braying Lord first entered the sinkhole, in Vardstein Vale, and there use it to lure out the elder plagewulf and destroy it. When it issues forth from its lair it will be killable, though it will be joined by dozens of its followers. If it is not destroyed or driven off, then it will be free to sink even further into the depths. It's doubtful anyone will be able to dislodge it from the Depths after that, and as its power grows it will become an even greater threat perhaps even rising to the power of a sovereign itself. The impact on Lorenzo's Deep Pockets should not be underestimated.

Participation

- Every member of the Rod and Shield and every character whose military unit explored the depths this season starts play with a lethal traumatic wound

Anyone who is a member of the Order of the Rod and Shield or whose military unit was sent on the Explore the Depths adventure is welcome to roleplay having been part of the expedition. Appropriate stories would involve some or all of the above: an order united by its desire to remove something wrong from the world, the first people falling sick and the sense of fear when the nature of the sickness was realised, the dread when the warden fell only to rise again, the sick betrayal by the followers of the Braying Lord, the hope when the plan was finalised.

Every member of the Rod and Shield and every owner of a military unit who was sent to Explore the Depths will receive a potentially fatal traumatic wound in their packs. If, as a member of the Rod and Shield, you would not have taken part in the expedition then you can choose to return the traumatic wound to GOD team. It is not possible for the owners of military unit to return traumatic wounds in this way. If you are both a member of the Rod and Shield and you have a military unit that took the action then you will only receive one traumatic wound but you will not be able to return it.

Heroes who Explored the Depths

Nation	Character
Dawn	Archavion Wolfborne
Dawn	Met Demeter
Dawn	Matthias

Dawn	Alys de Vere
Dawn	Wulfram Tanner
Dawn	Torwynn
Dawn	Goblet Grassman de Cordraco
Dawn	Dirk
Dawn	Kharn
Navarr	Asher
Navarr	Veradin
Navarr	Alwin
Navarr	Rhyffyllann Kraken's Crawl
The League	Diendre de Tassato
The League	Enriko Pescatore
The Marches	Edgar Guildenstern
The Marches	Finn
The Marches	Crofley Crowson
The Marches	Tod Grouse
The Marches	Mason Mourn
Wintermark	Olstan
Wintermark	Revice Halivor
Wintermark	Ivar Dunning
Wintermark	Erlend Gunnulfsson
Wintermark	Kara
Wintermark	Aegil
Wintermark	Blaze

Wintermark	"sword hind" Leofric Dunning
Wintermark	Orva Pirittasdottir
Wintermark	Arnor
Wintermark	Dagfinn