

Internal Error

Initial Brief

Incoming Transmission

Source Identifier: Ninth Truth, Borderland Botanists

Destination Identifier: TE3-Firebrand#Her Glorious Command#Starlight Ebbing#Muse IX#Unquiet Journey#

Subject: Zoological Lab Error

Message Begins

Calling all fighters, animal scientists and other combat-capable citizens with an interest on Kylal! There has been a slight loss of containment in the study lab recently set up on Kylal to investigate creatures brought back from other worlds.

It is critical that the creatures which have escaped are contained to protect the ecosystem of Kylal - and, if possible, contained without destroying them, so further study can then be carried out. Zoological or animal handling experience a bonus. This is Kylal: dress accordingly.

Volunteers should arrive at the Primary Access Outpost on Kylal as soon as possible - I will personally update you on the situation upon arrival.

Characters

- [Budding Leaf](#) - Alex ET
- [Endless Flame](#) - Rory
- [Iron Cold](#) - Robin

Summary

- The party arrive on Kylal and are greeted by Ninth Truth, who seems a little more panicked than he did in his broadcast message. He explains it's now been 2 days since they lost access to or contact with the experimental lab which was established next to the portal to Hive IV. This includes no contact from Envable Sweetness, a researcher who was the one person working in the lab at the time that contact was lost. Ninth Truth explains that the Borderlands Botanists and the Zeitgeist Experimental Keter Exploration Division - who between them manage the lab - have a plan to blow the access doors open, but want to be certain they don't a) harm anyone inside or b) release a flood of angry Hive IV animals onto Kylal when they do so.
- The party are told that there's a 'back route' in, which will get them in through a crack in the lab's walls so they can update Ninth Truth on the situation inside. This is a dangerous route known to have an Ice Maw Paddler, which is why nobody else is going in that way unless they have to. He also gives them a hastily-drawn schematic of the lab, which abuts the Pentagonal Portal Chamber and contains two specimen holding rooms and two experimental rooms off a long corridor between the portal chamber and the access door.
- Going down the unused tunnel, the party does indeed encounter Ice Maw Paddlers (plural), as

well as rock beetles, ice beetles, and a Slime which is very unhappy at having explorers push through it, as well as some Crypt Guardian corrupted cleansing spores emerging from a vent. They successfully overcome all of these problems - apart from the spores, which given Iron Cold a bad cough which Budding Leaf is unable to cure - and emerge into the lab corridor where they expect to, with the pentagonal chamber (gate currently deactivated) to one side.

- Here, they find a variety of Hive IV creatures. All are scared and easily provoked to attack the party. Budding Leaf calms the Ruffian and the Willow. The Huskees attack - one is taken down and left unconscious, but the other is executed by Iron Cold, still suffering the scars of the Holodeck fight against Huskees in [Under New Management](#). There is also a Mimic, but this is not a threat. (Budding Leaf checks whether this is 'Mint Cake', the Mimic encountered in [Operation: Beachhead](#), but it is not.) The creatures are tied up and left safely in the corridor.
- Most of the rooms off the corridor look destroyed. Peering into the one intact room that appears to still have power and lighting, the party find an experimental lab, with a researcher lying on the floor. Lengthy investigations discover:
 - There is a dead creature on a lab desk. It has apparently been killed and then a dissection has been started. Budding Leaf is able to confirm that this creature is/was Mint Cake. Inside the creature's chest cavity is what appears to be a strange, shiny, small rock.
 - The researcher on the floor is neither dead nor unconscious, but apparently very, very tired. They are, indeed, Envious Sweetness, and their communicator is lying no more than a metre away from them on the ground, but it has been just too much effort to reach out, pick it up and communicate with Ninth Truth. For two days. It has also been too difficult to do literally anything else apart from breathing.
 - There are various pieces of animal experimental equipment in the room - intelligence tests, a double maze, etc- and a computer containing the experimental history, plus other lab equipment such as a microscope.
 - There is a honey beetle in a cage in the corner. It has a little pot of honey.
- The party take the following actions:
 - They investigate the shiny rock. Anyone who picks it up is under the call EFFECT: LETHARGIC until they put it down again (whether holding it directly or carrying it on their person). Anyone who tries to interact with it with more.... force.... than that, gets varying extreme versions of similar effects. The party note the similarity of these effects to what has happened to the researcher.
 - Budding Leaf calls Ninth Truth on the researcher's communicator and explains the situation. Ninth Truth thanks them for the good news about the researcher and asks them to check the condition of the access doors and confirm whether blasting a hole in them would be a good idea.
 - Endless Flame uses the Treasure Scanner gained on [Treasure Hunt](#) to scan for treasure. Various expensive pieces of experimental equipment ping, as does the shiny rock. Endless Flame gathers as much experimental equipment as he can carry while the others are distracted.
 - Iron Cold and Endless Flame attempt to question the researcher, who can talk but very slowly and sleepily. This gets off on the wrong foot when Iron Cold searches their pockets, and is exacerbated when Endless Flame tries to take their wallet because it pinged as treasure. After a short argument, Iron Cold gets him to give it back, though extracting a lab pass from it. Iron Cold gets Envious Sweetness to explain they were recording their experimental work on a dictaphone and, after some linguistic confusion, finds out that the last action they took before falling on the floor was attempting to cut the shiny rock out of Mint Cake using a scalpel.
 - Budding Leaf is recognised by Envious Sweetness as a fellow researcher, and finally agrees to hand over their computer password. The computer is found to contain all the

experimental records leading up to this point, showing that the researchers had tried every test they could think of to investigate the Hive IV creatures' apparent ability to communicate. They are fairly sure that some of the creatures they have captured can communicate - there are erroneous results in intelligence tests etc which suggest some sharing of knowledge - but there are no clear causal factors and it doesn't seem to be linked to species. They have done behavioural tests, taken blood and tissue samples, and basically done everything they could think of short of killing an animal and dissecting it - which is what was to come next, the last time the computer was updated.

- Budding Leaf also tries to interact with the shiny rock. They accept its lethargic effects but attempt to communicate with it, trying to mentally radiate thoughts of calm and helping and friendship at it. This has some effects, which from the outside mostly look like Budding Leaf being pushed around / to the floor.
- Budding Leaf eventually gets their drone to carry the rock, which removes all other functionality from the drone but does mean none of the party suffer the lethargic effects of carrying it.
- While everyone else is distracted, Endless Flame goes over and weakens the bars of the honey beetle's cage. As the party wrap up their investigation, the beetle breaks out and escapes into the corridor.
- Also, a lot of arguing occurs within the party. Some about simple things such as 'who let that beetle out', some about complexities like 'what does honour even mean.' The party are, however, unanimous in their opinion that dissecting Mint Cake was probably a bad thing and that shouldn't be allowed to happen again.
- Out in the corridor, someone else has snuck in. The party hear sounds of a fight near the access door and round a corner to see some more Hive IV creatures fighting.... Aspexx? The party try to help Aspexx and sort things out later, but Aspexx react badly to their mission having been detected, and turn on the party to attempt to kill them. During a hard fight, the Hive IV creatures flee back down the corridor, away from the access door.
- With two Aspexx fighters subdued, the party report the situation to Ninth Truth, who is shocked that Aspexx are present and decides that the party needs help. Now certain they can blow up the doors without harming anyone, they tell the party that they'll set charges and should be able to come in and support soon
- The party chase the Hive IV creatures back down the corridor but are blocked by some cave slugs, which have emerged from a specimen room. These slugs have grown up on Kylal and have unusual ice abilities. The party murders them and moves on.
- The Hive IV creatures were seen disappearing into the pentagonal chamber, but when the party gets there they see:
 1. No Hive IV creatures
 2. Two more Aspexx operatives, who appear to be attempting to investigate the gate
 3. A hole in the wall where another pentagonal tunnel might be expected to be
 4. Crypt Guardians emerging from that hole and fighting Aspexx
 5. Oh and the gate is now switched on
- The party fight Aspexx and Crypt Guardians indiscriminately until all are defeated (or hidden, in the case of the Aspexx specialist). They determine that the Hive IV creatures probably went through the portal to Hive IV, and that overall they are happy with that outcome. They decide to untie the other Hive IV creatures they met earlier and send them through the portal too.
- When Budding Leaf steps through the portal leading a confused Huskee, their drone - carrying the rock - seems unconvinced about following Budding Leaf back. Budding Leaf has another 'thinking images at a rock' conversation which seems to imply the rock is uncertain whether it wants to stay on Hive IV or wants to stay with Budding Leaf. Budding Leaf does their best to reassure it, and it eventually stays with them.
- All living Hive IV creatures are returned to Hive IV, with the exception of one Mimic which

Endless Flame decides to adopt (or which decides to adopt him).

- Once everyone is back through the portal, Endless Flame starts trying to destroy the portal as clearly an evil thing, but only manages to dent its stone before others intervene. Budding Leaf attempts to dissuade him, while Iron Cold joins the argument too, and this is the situation as the 'rescuers' from the Borderland Botanists and ZEKED finally arrive. Ninth Truth intervenes to switch the portal off safely, and Endless Flame is convinced by overwhelming numbers not to try destroying it any more.

Aftermath

- Budding Leaf reports back to the botanists, broadly truthfully except making absolutely no mention of the shiny stone. They therefore pass on the following information:
 - Mint Cake's death almost certainly caused the breakout of creatures and damage to the lab, as those telepathically connected to it responded to its death
 - Budding Leaf therefore felt it was best to send all remaining Hive IV creatures back to Hive IV, and since there is no understanding of the reach of the apparent telepathy is firmly against any further invasive research to avoid annoying all the animals on an entire planet
- Separately, Budding Leaf also tries further communication with and investigation of the stone.
- Iron Cold takes some time off in Fableland to process the horrors he's had to witness and maybe come to terms with the existence of Huskees
- Endless Flame tries to get a contact on the inside of the facility, before sending a threatening letter (signed with a black spot) to the scientists in charge. He also sells off the lab equipment he stole.

Consequences

- Experimentation on Hive IV creatures is paused for now, with the lab turning its attention instead more towards the portal and the Pentagonal ruins
- Expeditions are still running to Hive IV to explore it, and those going are briefed on the 'telepathic' nature of its creatures as understood so far through the lab experiments - plus a general understanding of their other abilities - but dissuaded from attempting to cut creatures up to figure this out

Budding Leaf

- Budding Leaf's ability to communicate reliably with the stone is... a little intermittent. One might even say unreliable... fickle? It is, in many ways, like communicating with a person - if they don't want to talk back, they don't. (A person who doesn't always like you and doesn't always want to talk to you.)
 - When attempting to use Laboratory Analysis, Budding Leaf is subject once again to lethargic effects, prevented from using the equipment they were hoping to turn to this end. The only conclusion they can draw is that the stone is somewhat opposed to being scientifically researched in any way following its previous experiences.
 - Attempting to let the stone know that Budding Leaf wants to understand its desires, however, goes better. You get images of belonging, of the small part of the many parts, and you start to see a small part which is a little more leaf-shaped, which the other small

part sometimes belongs with and sometimes doesn't want to. Upon reflection, you can only come to the conclusion that it will let you know if it wants to come with you? And that if it *wants* to come with you, it won't stop you from taking it places with you? Probably.

- Mechanically, Budding Leaf can be understood to gain a very specific version of the Starsighted: Hearing Things skill which simply lets them know if the stone would like to come along on an upcoming mission or not. [OC: this can be established at the start of any mission Budding Leaf is going on: this will only ever trigger on missions where refs are present (don't have to be ref-written missions though).]

Endless Flame

- His overall Clout for the Mission is +1 Clout with both the Borderlands Botanists and Zeitgeist - reduced by Envious Sweetness's poor opinion of him and the fact he attempted to beat up the portal, but still overall positive thanks to his efforts fighting things.
- His attempt to gain a contact on the inside of the facility through persuasion or bribery is a struggle, as he has no clout with either the Borderland Botanists or Zeitgeist before this mission, and he has very much not made friends with either Envious Sweetness or Ninth Truth in the encounters above. An attempt to bribe a researcher with the lab equipment he previously stole also goes poorly. Ultimately he does not manage to gain more insight than he would get from reading the open published science which Zeitgeist produces from the experiments carried out there.
- He sends his threatening letter, signed only with a black spot, promising vengeance if they ever keep creatures in cages again or conduct invasive experiments on them. This letter doesn't seem to have been connected to him (yet) - if it ever is, he will lose -6 clout with both the Borderland Botanists and Zeitgeist.
- Selling the lab equipment is fairly lucrative so long as he sells it to someone who doesn't know where it came from - he gains 3 clout with any faction *apart from* the Borderland Botanists or Zeitgeist.

Iron Cold

- Back in Fableland, Iron Cold spends time talking through their experiences with anyone who's willing to listen. While people look politely baffled at his descriptions of holodecks, science labs, portals and similar, he gets a reasonable amount of sympathy on the 'terrifying skeletal monsters' parts of the stories, especially among the members of the Fableland Adventurers Academy. Their enthusiasm to go out and be similarly amazing executing terrifying monsters contributes a little to Iron Cold's recovery from their various traumatic Huskee experiences.

[internal error](#), [iron cold](#), [endless flame](#), [budding leaf](#)

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Last update: **2023/11/08 19:34**

