

Dust Runner: Tempest in the Valley 3

Synth music. Dark synth music. Volcano synth music. A sting. The cruiser is whining across the desert. It gets louder as it gets closer to us. Now we're in the cockpit and the computer is beeping steadily.

John

Only a 3 day hop to the Castle in the Caves. Palms Iron is lucky Anuk doesn't attack more often. A beast his size with a wingspan like a cloud wouldn't need more than a few hours to arrive at the city gates

Mil

He only comes when the dry lightning clears. Only when the moon is bright enough to light his way. Or so they say.

John

Doesn't quite make sense to me, Mil. I think we're in for more surprises than we think in that cave.

Mil

There it is! Just on the horizon!

The computer beeps confirmation. Target in sight.

John

Let's make the call.

Computer beeps and clicks. A tone.

John

Savage to Palms Iron. Queen Karstick, are you reading my signal?

Static zapping fades. The queen is now speaking, using her voice. It's raspy and worn from entropy. She hisses through the crackle of the radio.

Queen

I hear you, John Savage.

John

We're close to Anuk's cave, where they say his castle is.

Queen

Then by nightfall either he will be dead, or you will.

John

You leave the strategy to me and Mil. I'll contact you this time tomorrow. If I don't, assume the worst.

Queen

You have no idea what 'the worst' could possibly be.

John

I'll leave it to your considerable brain to picture it for me. Now you remember our deal, Mutant Queen. A gem for me, and a governorship for Mil. A nice block for him to run the way he sees fit.

Queen

If your sickly friend manages to make it back to the Iron Walls with the blood of Anuk, he will be rewarded with whatever he wants. I don't double cross my deals. That is low behavior.

John

If you say so. Just remember, if you DO decide to double cross me when we get back, I kill monsters professionally. Killing you won't be that hard.

Queen

I will expect your call tomorrow.

Her words get lost in a fizzy crackle of static.

Mil

You told me you couldn't kill her even if you wanted to within the city walls where your thoughts are open to her.

John

And that's still true. But out here she can't read our minds.

Mil

That's why she was using her voice on the radio.

John

Right. And I want her thinking I have a trick or two up my sleeve.

Mil

I think perhaps you do.

John

So you think I'm clever enough at least to have a few tricks?

Mil

I said perhaps. Get close enough to Anuk the Tenth to strike a killing blow and maybe then I'll call you clever.

John

Can you tell me anything about this castle?

Mil

It's inside the mouth of a cave inside a mountain. It has no door, as Anuk fears no one who enters.

John

That all?

Mil

No one who has entered that castle has ever come out to describe it.

John

Better be careful then. Let's park behind these rocks and walk the rest of the way.

The car whines off, computer beeping. The wind picks and and now we hear the footsteps through the sands. John and Mil whisper.

Mil

There, the entrance to the cave.

John

I've never seen a cave that size before. You could fit your Queen's tower through there!

Mil

Very nearly

John

I can see the castle just inside.

Mil

My sick eyes can't see that far, even with the light of the sun.

John

It's not as big as I pictured. Barely a castle. It looks like little more than a high tower covered in gaping holes. Tricky.

Mil

What is your plan?

John

I'm not sure yet.

Mil

You've staked our lives on killing the beast and you don't have a plan?

John

I've never killed a lizard like this before. I needed to see his keep first.

Mil

You've seen it.

John

Mmm. Now I need to see him. Let's go in for a better look.

Mil

That could be very dangerous.

John

Killing monsters often is.

Transition noises. Now the wind blows softly in the cave. their voices has a slight echo.

Mil

John, this tower is much much higher than any in Palm Irons.

John

I've seen taller towers. But not many.

Mil
It stinks here.

John
The stench of death.

Mil
I've smelt more than my share of death. This is just stink. (lowers his voice even more)
Something's not right.

Tug (distant)
HAIL

John
What's that?

Tug (still distant)
HAIL THERE. YOU'VE COME TO DIE. TO WORSHIP HERE?

Mil
Look!

Tug (getting less distant.)
HAIL THERE, LUNG-MEN!

John
Shh!

Mil
Quiet, fool!

Tug (arriving. he is dragging himself along the sand)
Lung-men! Welcome to the holy cave of Anuk the Tenth! He has kept me here to
welcome those who wish to die by his grace!

Mil
Hh! Oh! We have discovered the source of the stink, at least.

John
You are a prisoner of the lizard king?

Tug

I am TUG. I came once, seeking the end of the Tenth one's life. For my arrogance, he took my legs.

John

Did he take your sight as well?

Mil

That is the sickness. How did you know we were here?

Tug

Old Tug knows. He knows you are here. I am the herald of the coming.

John

You stink. You've lost more than your eyesight out here in the shadow of the tower.

Mil

How have you been keeping yourself alive?

Tug

The king brings his meals. The creatures that wail and yowl. I eat what falls from his lips. I drink their juices and blood. Here I am.

John

Gods. You poor creature. We have come to slay Anuk. Your days of suffering are over.

Tug

The only days I have left are suffering. You will not kill him. No one can kill him.

John

Where is he now?

Tug

There. In his tower. He sleeps where it's cool, when the sun begins to set he will soar. Some nights to the south. Most nights, to the east.

John

Does he fly low or high?

Tug

I don't know. I can't remember what it looks like. I can't remember what anything looks like. Lung-men, what asper has come into your minds that you wish to be here, where old Tug will die?

Mil
Does he leave every night?

Tug
Yes.

Mil
Is he fast? How quickly does he fly?

Tug
I don't know! I don't know, I don't know! It's a sound of thunder. It sounds like the Great Blow Up and I'm knocked about like a tooth in a baby's head. Then it's quiet and I wait for the adder's asp to return.

John
Maybe you should take him back to the cruiser. He won't be any good in a fight, and he may get in the way.

Tug
There will be no fight! He will come for you. You have come to die, Lung-Men! Die here at the altar. your blood is a prayer!

John
It's alright, friend. We're going to free you. You're no longer his slave or plaything.

Tug
I am his herald! I am his warning! I am here to point you to the life after. You are already dead! HE IS HERE. HE IS ALWAYS.

FWOOSH. CRAZY LOUD FLAP FLAP. A GRUMBLE GROWL. FLYING NOISES.
TUG IS STILL SHOUTING NONSENSE.

TUG
HE HAS COME! HE HAS COME! ANUK HAS COME!

Mil
John!

John
Get down!

John's laser spear turns on.

John
Mil train your gun on his eye! I'll try to slice his belly open while you distract him!

FWOOSH! Anuk is flying and growling. Tug is jabbering. Mil fires a few rocks. Anuk roars.

Mil
My rock-rifle is useless against him. I could maybe blind him if I could put the barrel right against his eye.

John
We need him to land. Close. Aim for his face, he'll come down to kill us.

BLAM! BLAM! Anuk roars and swoops in. LASER SPEAR! Anuk roars in pain for the first time. He flies off.

Mil
I don't think Anuk has ever tasted laser spear before. You cut him pretty bad.

John
It only angered him. He's circling, he'll be back on us in moments. He'll be wary of me now, I've burned him. You keep shooting, go around that way. I'll come from behind and carve him up!

Anuk lands in the sand like thunder. Tug is laughing like a crazy John Hurt.

Anuk
You think I'll be so easily distracted by a sick sliver pelting rocks at my eye, Middle-Man?

Mil
He speaks!

John
By the Gods!

Tug
Anuk the Tenth is your only god now!

Anuk
Well? Are you going to beg me? Fear your lives are ending, and drimmle that I might let
you live?

Mil
I don't think I'll spend my last moments on my knees.

Anuk
I can take your knees from you then. Like Tug. You can be the new herald if you like. I
only need one. You and your brother will have to fight for the honor. I like when you little
ones fight each other.

John
We won't fight to amuse you, creature. We would die here on our feet before you.

Anuk
That's no good. Mmmrrmff. I need a new servant. Tug has become too mad on the
blood of my feasts to be any more use.

Tug
Oh thank you master! THANK-
squish.

Mil
You monster!

Anuk
MONSTER?

John
Yes! Lower than any boulder bear or Hop Drake I've seen. An animal with a red tooth or
claw is as blameless as the sun for rising each day. But you have power and intellect.
When you kill, it's murder. It's sport.

Anuk
This man came with a caravan. a wagon full of sharpened steel and guns that shoot rocks.

He came into my home, and would have my blood in jars to sell as false medicine to fools. He came seeking my life, is he not a monster? Does his death weigh more than mine, MIDDLE-MAN?

John

You can try your tricks with the simple minds that make your bread, Anuk. But I come here on behalf of the city to the south. you can't tell me you tear it open and scoop out it's men to squish like spiders because you're afraid.

Anuk

Spiders, spiders. Spiders? I don't know spiders. I don't know. Are they the little ones to you?

Mil

Yes. You could call them that.

Anuk

And you kill them? You squish them like I squished Tug the Madman?

Mil

If they are poisonous. If they would harm us.

Anuk

As you have come to harm me. Little spiders, I will stomp out your poisons! And one day I will tear the walls away from your city and squish every spider I find inside!

John

The city to the south. You want it torn down, you want to kill everyone inside before they can kill you?

Anuk

How can I let the city stand when every season the spiders come here to gut me in my sleep?

John

You've been trying to destroy the wall of Palms Iron for many seasons?

Mil

Since I was a very young boy.

Anuk

Hmm. We can get you inside the wall. We can get you into the city to kill those who would kill you first.

Mil
John! No!

Anuk
Hurr hurr hurr hurr! You think I am so stupid? you think I don't know a trap when it's set about my neck?

Mil
John you cannot trade my home for your quest. Thousands would die. Children of the sick would die screaming!

Anuk
ALL WILL DIE SCREAMING!

John
Hold! Hold, both of you! You don't need to destroy the entire city. Just the mutants who rule it.

Anuke
Mut-ANTS? Are they like you spiders? Are they middle-men like you?

John
Worse than I. Worse than the sick men who come to kill you. The mutants sit comfortably in their castle, like yours, sending out raiding parties of sick men to cut your heart from your chest.

Anuk
rrrrrrrrGGRAAAAHH! I WILL KILL THE MUT-ANTS! I WILL SQUISH THEM LIKE SPIDERS. I WILL TASTE THEIR SKINS!! I WILL TAKE EVERYTHING THEY HAVE!

John
Hold, Anuk. What happens after the three of us go into the city and kill the mutants?

Mil
The three of us?

Anuk

Then I will kill everyone else!

John

Maybe. Maybe they kill you first. There's a lot of spiders in that nest. And they have weapons.

Anuk

Anuk the tenth is not afraid! I am strong. I have lived too long to fear the little ones.

John

I cut you. My spear cut you deep, there in your arm. What happens when 700 men with 700 guns come after you?

Anuk

Hrrr...your fire stick IS deadly. Maybe even for me. I have never fought 700 strong before.

Mil

You would kill many of us, but if you actually entered the city, eventually you would die too. From above you are very deadly, but down below...

Anuk

I see...

John

Right. So we can't just go in and kill everyone. We would all die. What we do is, you kill the mutants. Raze their castle to the ground. The sick who live in the city hate the mutants far more than they hate you.

Anuk

Impossible! I am far more terrible and fearsome than any mut-ANT could be.

John

And so you name Mil the new ruler of the city. You tell them his word is law. And if they do not obey, you will destroy his opposers.

Mil

What?!

Anuk

hrrr hrr HRRR HRR HURRR HURRRRRR!! I would come as liberator to you little

bugs! They would think me a God! HURR HURRR!

John
Maybe.

Mil
John this is madness! Queen Judge will know as soon as we enter her gates what our plan is!

John
But once we're in the gates, our friend Anuk will be in the gates also. It'll be too late to stop us.

Anuk
HARRRR HARR HARRRRR!! I like you middle-man. I may still kill you, and eat you when this is over. But I like you.

John
A strong man makes corpses of his enemies. A smart make makes friends of them.

Anuk
I'm not a man.

Mil
And this doesn't make you clever. It makes you dangerously reckless.

John
I have a plan.

Anuk
Then let's go topple a kingdom together! HURR HRR RHRRR HRR!