

“Hey, can you also explain why you secretly brought a war golem?”

“Don’t give me that shit, Farren. Solfis is an insurance against strong monsters, and I don’t advertise his abilities because I don’t want to end up with a dagger in my back if someone realizes he is worth a fortune. Are you telling me you brought an assassin as an insurance against monsters? A fucking assassin?”

“Where did you find a war golem anyway?”

“Faaaarren,” Viv interrupted him. Her voice turned dangerous. Marruk turned her shield towards the voice of Neriad. Her expression was a mix of anger and disappointment.

“Don’t fucking try me,” Viv finished.

The thing she recognized as intimidation lashed out. She finally understood what it was. Power and ruthlessness left an imprint on who she was, and the skill was simply the mark on her soul making itself known. It told the other person: I have killed before and I will do it again, to you.

“Fine. Let’s all calm down. I’ll tell you the whole truth.”

“Make it snappy.”

Farren’s pride rebelled at the verbal lash, but he still offered his explanation.

“The trip was a test, not one of loyalty, but of capability. I wanted to know how well you could clear undead monsters from enclosed spaces for a project of mine. I am very much satisfied. As for Irao, he... well, he and I go way back. I met him in Morny when I was twelve, and he has been looking over me ever since.”

“So he was here to protect you from us?”

“Alright, so, Irao does what Irao does. I saved his life and, despite my best efforts to tell him that there were no debts, he has followed me. To answer your question, he was here to protect me from everything. Irao is not very loquacious.”

“Is he even human?” Viv asked. The strange being clung to the lower cliffs of the uncanny valley as far as she was concerned.

“He is a human variant.”

Before Viv’s incredulous expression, Farren decided to expand.

“He is mostly human. I suppose you don’t have that in your homeland. Hmm, how should I explain? A century and a half ago, an outlander arrived in the distant land of Halluria. That’s north east of Baran, near the Isthmus. Halluria was, and still is, a lawless den of ignominy, where life is worthless, and the dark gods are openly worshipped. He displayed an amazing ability to twist people into different forms to create chimera using a process he called splicing. His most infamous achievement was the creation of the Hadal Strain humans. They are literally that, a human variant.”

Marruk took a protective step towards Viv and made a religious sign before knocking on her shield. The solid woman was obviously shaken at the mention of Hadal Strain people, whatever they were.

“He was murdered for that. The Princes of Halluria loved an entire subspecies dedicated to assassination. That was until they became the prime targets of those new agents. So many powerful nobles were slain in the years that follow that the outlander was executed. We have no record of his name. Only his legacy was left behind.”

“Hold on, are you saying that Irao...”

“Is one of them, yes. He is an ancient assassin so far in his path that I don’t know exactly what his limits are. The Hadal Strains have been hunted and killed whenever possible, so I don’t know how many still survive. It doesn’t help that they are not exactly the most social people around.”

“What makes them so special?”

“They have a few monster traits and an unusually high black attunement. That’s all we know for sure. Many in the church would kill Irao for what he is, but I won’t let them. And I hope you won’t either.”

Viv did not have to think about that. Would she risk the wrath of a century-old assassin in the off-chance that it would accrue positive opinion with religious ethnic cleansers?

Absolutely the fuck not.

“My lips are sealed provided that you come clean with everything. Now.”

“Yes, yes, getting to it. You are the one who asked questions, remember? Anyway, Irao is a separate issue. My test relates to the project I have that could propel Kazar to prosperity in less than a generation.”

Farren’s demeanor changed. From afraid and seemingly out of his depth, the young administrator grew animated. Viv recognized the fervor of the man talking about his passion.

“Alright, so Kazar is a remote city with little strategic value due to a variety of reasons. First, its remoteness means that resupplying remains a constant challenge, thus stopping any prospect of becoming a trading town. You follow so far?”

“Yes,” Viv replied with impatience.

“That’s because of the Deathguard forest. The forest is massive and unforgiving. Clearing it is an absolute impossibility. The second is that we have no natural resources to exploit, at least none that would justify the hassle. Even the fertile land is a thin band nearing capacity. All the arable land west of here, along the sea, are simply too remote to bother. Anyone here would be at the mercy of roaming monsters.

But what if there was a way to solve both problems at once?”

A guilty smile bloomed on Farren’s face.

“Are you familiar with the history of the empire, Miss Bob?”

“No.”

“A long time ago, the Old Empire and the Enorian heartlands were connected by a network of tunnels that snaked through the entire chain. The closest one went through the Min Goles iron mines. I believe that I know where the entrance is. We locate it, and we find a path that bypasses the forest, cuts travel time, and gives us access to iron deposits.”

“Thus providing both a shortcut and the resources justifying trade,” Viv finished.

“Yes! We only need to make sure that they are clear. Just imagine how much the veins have regrown by now.”

Viv blinked.

“I’m sorry what?”

It turned out that, since the planet was sort of ‘alive’, mineral deposits regrew. Viv asked if that meant the tunnels were refilled with stone or something and Farren looked at her like she was retarded.

“But... of course not!”

“Listen, I never had to work on the minutiae of mining operations before so cut me some flucking slack.”

“I understand. In any case, your performance is more than adequate. I came here to make sure that you were up to par with war mages despite the fact that you are still early on the path, and you are. I also came, ahem, this is embarrassing.”

“To make sure that I was not an asshole?”

“In a way. Yes. Or try to extort me. I did believe that Irao would be enough to protect me, should the worst come to pass. I just did not expect you to have a hidden asset as well.”

“You’d better not tell anyone about Solfis.”

“On my honor I so swear. In return, I will ask you to keep Irao’s existence a secret. I would not just be punished by my hierarchy, he would also be tracked down.”

“You seem to care about him a great deal.”

Farren’s expression turned grim.

“I do. However, and with the exception of your golem, Irao is the deadliest being in all of Kazar by a large margin.”

This surprised Viv quite a bit.

“I assumed that it would be lady Varska?”

“No. I do not mean to demean her, it’s just that assassins are sent after mages for a reason. They are the only ones who can stop a mage before they can bring their power to bear, and Irao is firmly at the top of the assassin path. I have seen what he can do... when he bothers. If hunters come to take him down, it will be a bloodbath, and he will simply disappear.”

“So, your plan is to have you, Irao, Marruk and I clear a freaking tunnel? What if there is stuff in there that’s not black-aligned?”

“No no, my plan is to have a full retinue of warriors go with you as support. I will come as well, of course. We will find the entrance, and explore carefully over a period of a few weeks. I do not expect us to find a way immediately, just as I do not expect the path to be fully cleared. Some measure of digging will certainly occur. I can solicit the local mountain tribes for workers. Sardanal knows that they can use the money, may he bless them with wealth.”

Farren seemed to think of something and it was important enough, so he stood next to Viv and spoke in a low voice.

“Look, I need you to understand so I will state it one last time. I do not control Irao. I don't even know where he is most of the time. Irao is his own man, and I will do nothing to change that. His kind has been used ruthlessly as tools since the moment of their creation. I refuse to do the same. And there is something else...”

“Yes?”

“Reports of Hadal Strains have decreased over the past decades, so he might very well be the last of his kind. Cut him so slack, please.”

“Ok fine. He follows you around because he is grateful and that's it.”

“Yes. Pretty much that.”

“Fine. Ok. Anyway, let's check the tunnel then go.”

“Agreed.”

With Marruk first, they walked down to find that the nascent Necrarch had dug through the next room but failed to properly clear it. There was a sort of circular room at the end that reminded Viv of a lair or something. It had been wiped completely clean. There was only one thing left.

“What a good find,” Farren said, as he kneeled to pick up a black sphere.

“Whats's that?” Viv asked.

“A black-aligned core. Very rare, considering what you have to kill to get one. Of course a nascent Necrarch would have one. You can find them in very old gut spillers as well. It will contain mana that can be used at a later date by drawing from it. Black-aligned cores can only store energy from the relevant color, so it can only be used for specific tasks. Here, take it.”

Farren deposited the sphere in her hands. It was slightly larger than a tennis ball and had this strange mix of heaviness and weightlessness she associated with mana items. There was a trickle of energy inside. It was also much smaller than what Solfis used in his current frame, much less the past one. Apparently, nascent Necrarch did not hold a candle to adult dragons.

“I'm guessing that it's worth its volume in gold?” she asked.

“Several times over,” Farren confirmed, “but there would be no way to turn it to coin here in Kazar, at least not without a massive discount. Lady Varska mostly uses brown mana, so she would have no use for it.”

Viv understood the concept of illiquid assets. She also wanted the thing for herself, and for good reasons.

She pushed some mana inside and felt it coil in the strange receptacle. The core could hold it as if it were inside of her own body. She had found a fucking battery, and she really, really wanted to keep it for herself.

“You can keep it for yourself,” Farren declared.

“Are you sure?” Viv asked. It was a very generous offer.

“Knight-Principal Cormick once said, a good leader uses everyone and everything to the best of their abilities. Your men, your gear, the environment and your foes, all are tools in the arsenal of the mindful captain.”

This... did not sound stupid at all?

“Huh.”

“I am investing in you, Bob. With your skills at my side, my plan has much better chances to succeed. Please consider this as an apology for doubting you as well as a show of good faith.”

Amusingly, it was Marruk who was now eyeing the Voice with no small amount of disappointment. It appeared that the Kark found his plotting distasteful.

“Consider me placated,” Viv admitted. The man was the right amount of ambitious and idealistic. She could respect that.

“A core this size would best be used in a construct shaped like a staff, or whatever strikes your fancy. I know that northern mages prefer sword pommels. Sadly, no one here has the know-how to create a suitable frame.”

“I expected that much.”

“Our little frontier town still has much to acquire.”

They headed back up. Viv was the second out after Marruk and she found the slightly misshapen shape of Irao sitting on the floor. The ground around him had a pile of ash she had not seen before. The assassin probably had ways to kill the unkillable.

As she watched, he reached towards his ninja headdress and slowly unfolded it. Viv looked on with curiosity.

Irao was completely bald. He barely had eyebrows. His skull was large and shaped a bit strangely, with a certain reptilian quality to it. The man was on the bony, ugly side of the spectrum, but it was his eyes and teeth that sealed the deal. All his teeth were slightly sharp, which he revealed by taking a deep breath. His pupils were slitted like a cat's, and the iris covered much of the sclera. They were dark brown.

Viv was unimpressed.

After weeks spent killing horrors that smelled like skunk knickers and looked like a rectal prolapse, Irao's face was not even in the top ten of disgusting things she had endured in the past month. Hell, he was not even the ugliest person she had met before coming here.

"Yes?" she asked politely, because it would not hurt staying polite with a genetically engineered assassin.

"Hellow. I want to spar with your golem."

As before, the voice was raspy and slightly disturbing. Viv considered what Farren had said about Irao's antisocial behavior. She tried to formulate a refusal that would not offend before realizing that this was the wrong thing to do.

"Solfis is intelligent. Ask him directly."

The assassin blinked, the gesture unexpectedly normal. It made him look like a person.

Irao stood up and deliberately walked to Solfis' frame, which Marruk had helpfully replaced in the sled.

"Spar with me?"

//I only fight to kill.

//Your death would harm the princess' cause.

//Therefore, I must refuse.

"I understand."

Viv turned to gauge the assassin's reaction, only to find that he had already disappeared from her sight.

They decided to make their way back without waiting. Forcing it, they would be back in Kazar by nightfall. The horses had magically-induced stamina, after all.

Marruk used the opportunity afforded when Farren stepped away to attend to a natural need. She leaned towards Marruk.

“Do all humans have plans within plans?” she asked. Viv felt that this was an important moment.

So far, Marruk had remained carefully professional. Viv was not a fan of cajoling people into liking her, and she also estimated that it would throw the poor Kark off. It was, therefore, the first time that she asked a question that did not immediately relate to living or working together. It was her first personal question.

She was opening up. Viv scarcely believed her ears.

As for the question itself, it related to something she had asked herself for years. Are people bad because they plan and manipulate? Are manipulation and influence bad or neutral tools? Where does brainwashing stop and conviction start? Is it wrong to use people who lack critical thinking to your own end?

She should have read more books.

In any case, she had found an answer that sort of suited her. It had, to her annoyance, come from her dad.

“Anybody with a smidgen of authority needs them, or they will fail the people they lead.”

Then, after a moment.

“Do you understand?”

Marruk’s eyes narrowed. She did not like the conversation much, but Viv’s stoic expression showed genuine concern and the strong woman was sensitive to it.

“You mean that Farren schemes because everyone else schemes?”

“Schemes implies carrying out something illegal or morally wrong.”

“Morally long?”

This fucking weird language barrier.

“Bad. Something bad. Farren wants to do something good. He has a plan.”

“Why hide the plan from everyone? Why hide his reasons from us?”

“You know that humans are hard to trust.”

“Yes!”

“Humans are hard to trust for other humans. Farren also needs help from other people who have other goals than just helping him. That is why he hides and plans and asks. A cold mind serving a good heart, that is the best. I think.”

“A cold mind serving a warm heart...” Marruk repeated, considering. Eventually, she nodded to herself.

“I think you told the truth about humans. This is a good sentence. It also makes the humans look better in my eyes.”

“That is good to hear.”

Farren returned then, whistling and fastening his belt.

“I have decided to forgive you,” Marruk informed him with a solemn voice.

The Voice of Neriad froze like a deer in headlights, much to Viv’s amusement.

“Hmmm thank you?”

“If another assassin appears at my back when I am fighting a dangerous monster and this is your fault, I will still strike you down. Warm heart or not. Yes?”

“Hmmm yes, Marruk, of course. I apologize, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Remember. No more surprises.”

“I will do my best.”

Viv cannot help but smirk when Farren climbed back on his horse with visible dismay. Serves him right. Also, Marruk’s allegiance was successfully transferred to her.