

Valmar silently crept through the slopes of a desert. The sun had reached its apex and began to set, its heat burning his ivory skin. A scrawny, young man had told him in the morning beforehand that the region he was going into was the Sai-Kahleek, a death zone for any traveller. *“Arrogant fool!”* Varus’ voice echoed through Valmar’s mind. Valmar sighed, knowing that the Darkin would have killed the man for even speaking. Thanking the man for his warning, Valmar carried on.

“The Sai-Kahleek is a place I never thought I would enter.” Valmar spoke aloud. Varus scoffed at the comment. *I thought mortals craved the thrill of the hunt. Were you two not ‘beast hunters’ while you still had bodies?*

*Hunters we were.* The familiar voice of Kai responded to Varus. *But the rumours of the monsters of the Sai-Kahleek are something else. Hundreds have journeyed through, but only dozens have come out unscathed.* Valmar breathed in some relief. Kai had been quiet for some time, and it had begun to worry him. Varus laughed. *Now now Valmar, I wouldn’t end my game with such haste. I bore easily and it wouldn’t make for entertaining sport.*

While Valmar walked, the ground slowly shifted. The earth turned jagged & rocky as the softness of the sand wilted away in the breeze. As he drew closer, he came across a cragged ruin with a twisted series of tunnels tracing through it. The air smelled unnatural. A stench of magic even he was unfamiliar with. It felt new, ravenous. Valmar gripped the twisted Darkin bow and trudged into the abyssal path as Varus’ voice grew ever stronger in his mind.

Valmar spent the next couple of hours ducking and weaving throughout the sharp, labyrinthine formations. Several times he had witnessed a small light in them, almost pulsing with life with an unnatural glow. “What is this place? No beast that we have hunted ever had a nest such as this.” Valmar continued forwards. His legs and arms began to tremor as he walked. He was exhausted, nervous and in unfamiliar terrain. He could hear Varus in his mind taunting him to let him take over. *Sleep, Valmar. I have enough strength for the both of us. Give in.* Valmar was almost tempted to let the Darkin take over. *No! You know what happens if he takes over Valmar! You cannot allow it! I will not allow it!* Kai’s voice drummed through his mind, reverberating through its deepest expanses.

A low, guttural groan silenced them. Quickly, Valmar drew the bow in the direction of the sound. Red energy formed at his trembling fingertips as he prepared to shoot, drawing out Varus’ power. A small, pale creature was easing out of one of the glowing inlets. Its white body glistened while it used a series of smaller legs along its lower half to balance itself as it crawled with a massive pair of clawed forearms towards the glaring sunlight. Small crackles of energy radiated around its body before it slowly took on a shade of violet, its soft skin being replaced with hardened plates as it stayed in the harsh glow.

Valmar fired the arrow. It flew with misguided force, cracking into the wall above the creature. He missed. Valmar fumbled as the creature turned to the sound above it. His heart pounded in panic as he tried to draw out another arrow. The creature now turned in his direction. With a shrill cry it bound towards him, leaping into the air. This time, the second arrow thundered through its skull. *Thank goodness*, Valmar thought. His brief relief turned to horror as the laugh of the Darkin suddenly echoed through the ruin.

“You tremble and quake like a scared animal! Do you really think you alone could command my power so easily without repercussion?” Varus now spoke aloud.

*No!* Valmar wailed. *How could you have taken over so easily?*

“Only the Warrior-Queen, who sundered my race on this world long ago, was capable of wielding me.” Varus replied. “It was she who bound me, and only she who could temper and direct my fury.” Varus grimaced as his voice hardened with anger, remembering how he was responsible for striking down so many of his kin. He stared at the dead creature. It quickly crumbled to dust and blew away in the soft wind. “You mortals are nothing compared to her, unworthy of remembering.”

*W-what was that thing?* Kai’s voice trembled. “Do they frighten you?” Varus mockingly responded. “Creatures of a dark and desolate world. They constantly hunger, ever searching to satisfy their appetence.” As Varus neared the end of the path, he heard a shrill cry nearby. The surrounding rocks and crags started screeching in return. Varus hastily looked around, raising his bow and continuing. “They are also never alone.”

Varus barely had time to react before a large creature propelled itself into the air from one of the glowing tunnels. He fired two shots through its underbelly, quickly sidestepping as it dropped. Under his feet, the earth split, revealing a tooth-filled maw. Varus leapt back and fired a red bolt through its jaw. Rotating to his right to fire at another creature bound towards him, he pierced its neck. It tumbled and fell, skidding to a stop a mere footstep away. Varus shoved ever forwards towards the exit of the ruin, leaping and firing at the building horde, slaying dozens of them in a frenzy of light. Dashing into the descending sunlight, his pursuers slowed. They screeched as they fell backwards, the harsh light burning their soft skin.

In the horizon beyond him lay another ruin. He pushed towards it, his direction never wavering. *You won’t stop, will you?* Valmar’s tone had changed. It was quiet, sombre. Varus felt the weakness in him. He won’t be taking control for a while.

“My vengeance will never be quelled, mortal. I will bring ruin to this wretched world.”