

Boss Battle?

“Statement: This unit detected a Source Weave shift within the Host and its own internal structure.”

I blinked at her. “And by internal structure you mean, yourself?”

“Feedback: Affirmative. This Unit detected a shift at the beginning of your meditative period and at its end. The primary shift included an unknown interference with my matrix. This Unit attempted to resist.”

That sounded like Saia was almost pulled into that space too. I wondered how or why. Was it because we were bonded? Would she get her own Mask if she went. I wanted to experiment, but this wasn't the time for it.

“We'll talk about it later, anything else?”

“Feedback: The host appears to have a new Source Weave echo present within the body. No Engram detected, the echo does not match any recorded Engrams in my databases. There were also physical changes. An increase in muscle mass of 8.5% overall.”

I glanced down at my wrist, where Saia had taken the form of a silver bracelet covered in hexagonal shapes again as I experimented. “That could be my skill, I think,” I said as I picked up the monkey corpses and threw them around, trying to gauge what the skill did. I felt stronger than I was, though I wasn't quite sure by how much.

The tiny dragon didn't respond. I felt like Saia was having issues. The magic, or rather skills seemed to be different. The Mask or whatever it

was, appeared to be another way of using the Source that did not seem to align with what she was familiar with.

“Okay,” I said to myself, taking a deep breath. “Let’s get this over with.”

I drank my fill of the blood, felt as strong as I possibly could. My leg still bothered me a bit, but I had a new skill, and had my daggers ready. I looked up at the hill and the pillar of light still shining there like a beacon, then I started walking.

I kept careful watch on my surroundings, not wanting to get ambushed again, as I had no idea what else might lurk in this place. My steps were light and I made no sound as I reached the top. The summit was one large round plateau with several big rocks that I took cover behind. There were... several things of interest before me.

The one that drew my eyes was the source of the pillar of light. It looked the same as what I had seen in the ruins, before I had stupidly approached it, a crack in space. Almost as if it was closed. The only difference was that it was illuminated by the pillar of light stretching into the sky. It was on top of a large piece of rock. The next thing of interest was, of course, the big thing apparently sleeping beneath said rock.

It looked like a fur-less bear, with thick skin and short stubby horns on top of its head. It also had what appeared to be six legs. It was gray in color, and big, about as large as a black bear. I grimaced and decided that I did not want to fight it at all.

The last thing of interest was surprising. Against the rock that had the crack in space, and beneath which the monster was sleeping, was what appeared to be a chest with a big lock on it. It was made out of wood and about two meters across and one high.

I wondered what that was about, but I had started to understand that some things I should just take as they came. Slowly, I made my way around the hilltop, putting the rock in between me and the monster. I wasn't about to fight it, there was no need to risk it. Once I was hidden from its line of sight, I made my way across, reaching the rock in the center swiftly. With deft and silent movements, I started to climb. I reached the top of the rock and slowly made my way to the rift.

Immediately I could tell that something was off. I wasn't feeling the same sensation as I had before, and the crack didn't seem to be reacting in the same way. I reached out toward it, to touch it and nothing happened, *hijueputa*. Of course it couldn't be that easy. I narrowed my eyes and tried again, attempting to step into it. It seemed that my way out was closed. I looked around, saw the chest and the monster guarding it. I had a feeling that the way out wouldn't open unless something happened. My frustration made me forget myself, my foot hit a small stone and it went flying off the rock. I froze as it hit the ground.

Then, the monster stirred, its great head raised and blood red eyes met my own. *Fuck*.

It roared and jumped. My eyes widened as it almost floated over the side of the rock as it climbed up, its claws biting into the stone as if it was clay. I jumped backward, sending myself faster and farther than I expected. The [Lesser Strength] seemed to be working. I flipped through the air as I grabbed my weapons and whirled them in my hands. It reached the top, and as I landed I dashed forward. It moved quickly, but as it tried to climb down I saw an opening. I slashed at its snout, scoring a cut on its side. It shook its head and roared, then jumped. I reacted by ducking and rolling beneath it, my hands raised to score cuts on its belly.

Its hide was tougher than the animal in the jungle. I couldn't get my weapons as deep. It crashed on the ground, and I dashed forward, swinging my daggers. I stabbed one in its thigh, and heard it roar. Then

it twisted around and swiped, as my second one came down on its side, faster than I expected. I leaped back, feeling the air from its passage. I couldn't get hit by that.

I jumped back again, creating more distance between us. I studied it, saw that its wounds weren't serious. I was barely doing anything. I couldn't have this fight go for much longer, I had pushed myself as fast as I could to match it, I was draining myself quickly. A vampire was not made for long engagements at full power. We tricked and killed from ambush, fighting only for short periods of time when we had no other choice. My leg was burning again, if I pushed it more I might open the wound again.

I gritted my teeth and bent my knees as the animal snarled in my direction.

“Saia, some help?”

The bracelet on my wrist flowed into the air and turned into the small hand sized dragon, flying next to me.

“Feedback: This unit will try.”

“Go for its eyes, distract it,” I said.

It charged after me and I started running to the side, around the rock as Saia took to the sky. The animal came after me, all six of its legs pounding the ground in a terrifying display of power and speed. I knew better than to let it catch me. Once I rounded the rock in the middle and got out of its view, I immediately jumped, climbing on top of it then raised my weapons.

The monster rushed beneath me, not realizing where I was. I jumped and landed on its back, my weapons cutting deep into its flesh. It roared

and turned its head to try and bite me, Saia dove, her tiny claws heading straight for its eyes. It roared in pain as Saia burst its eye out, as blood flowed freely all over the side of its face.

It reared up on its hind legs, then swiped at its own face, catching Saia and ripping her in two.

“Saia!” I yelled as my weapons slipped out of its body and I fell to the ground. I saw the dragon fall on the ground as the animal turned on me. My anger rose, the **thirst** reared its head and I charged it. It swiped at me with two of its limbs on the left side, I dodged beneath them, stepping to the side where Saia had gouged its eye, its blind spot.

My improvised daggers lashed out, swiping in a wild flurry as fast as I possibly could, cutting open its side, mangling its flesh. It twisted around, then backhanded me so hard that I flew and struck the rock in the middle. I winced, my breath left me as I felt a crack of bone. I fell on the ground and looked down to see my left arm broken, the bone sticking out. *Fuck me.*

The monster roared in my direction, then fell back on all six and headed my way. I dropped my weapon to grab my hand and wrenched the bone in place, shuddering at my bones grinding. I groaned and pulled myself up to my feet, grabbing the weapon in my right hand.

From the corner of my eye I noticed a silvery pool of goo flowing in my direction. *Saia!* I was glad that she was alright. She flew up and reformed into the dragon again, this time smaller than she was the last time. She had sustained some damage it seemed.

“Report: Structural damage to left arm detected.”

“No shit,” I grimaced.

“Can you do the throat thing again?” I asked, referring to her mode of killing a monkey earlier.

“Feedback: This Unit will try.”

With that the animal charged, and I headed straight at it. Saia flew above me, then dove at it. A burst of red light exploded out of the animal hitting me in the face and sending me flying back. I hit the ground and rolled.

What the fuck was that! I looked back and saw Saia on the ground near me, sluggishly trying to get up to her feet. I tried to move but felt as if my entire body had gone numb. I saw it shook its head, but then it was coming at us.

Shit, shit, shit. Skills, of course there were things like this too. I stumbled to my feet, feeling shaky, but the feeling was fading. I lost my weapon, and as I tried to look for it I saw Saia try to fly and fall, then she turned into goo and flowed to me, slithering up my leg to my right arm and over my hand. She shaped herself like a glove, and then the tips of my fingers now covered by Saia turned into long and sharp claws.

The animal leapt at me, and I jumped to the side, still feeling like my body was sluggish, but managing it just in time. I lashed out with my hand and swiped across its side. Saia sunk into the monster's hide, opening up deep gashes. I felt her pass over something hard and cut into it too. Bone, I knew.

It turned around and swiped, forcing me to duck. I was tired, and whatever it had done had made me slow. I wouldn't be able to avoid it for much longer. I made a decision and jumped in close then rolled beneath it as it came at me. I snapped Saia up at its stomach, the claws sinking deep into the animal's belly, opening it up from chest to stomach.

I rolled out of the way as it passed over me and then glanced at my arm. It was covered in blood almost all the way to my elbow. Saia was a lot sharper, and I hadn't realized that she could do that. I didn't have the time to ask her if she could take the shape of any weapon as the monster attacked, blood spilling beneath it with every step. I waited for it to be on top of me then move in its blind spot, running around it and lashing out, stinging it with more wounds. The scent of its blood filled my nostrils, it consumed all of my existence. I had to taste it, to feel it down my throat. I could imagine the power of it.

I was without mercy, dancing in and out. Forcing it to bleed. Quickly, it started slowing down, until it just collapsed, it didn't use whatever power or skill it had used before. Now, it was barely able to breathe. I approached it from the side, carefully in case that it was pretending to be more injured than it was.

Once I was close enough, I jumped on top of it and stabbed my claws into its throat opening it all up and leaning down to drink. The taste of it was divine. The memories that came to me were also... confusing. It was a memory only of the dark nothingness and then the hill, a single imperative thought echoed through the monster's mind, to protect the hill. Power filled my body and I could feel my wound healing, starting to close and sensation returning to my arm.

Mask of the Drainer — No Investment; Third Carving

Again I felt the change. I waited, hoping to feel another change, maybe another skill. But there was nothing. *It jumped up again*, I noted.

I stepped back from the body and then wiped my mouth with my hand. Then, I glanced down at my arm. “Thanks Saia.”

“Statement: Survival of the host is the imperative to the continuation of this unit’s operation.”

“Yeah, yeah, you could at least lie and say that you did it for me. And you really should try and call me Marianna instead of host, or at least Mari.”

“Feedback: This unit will take that under consideration in the future.”

I groaned as I tried to move my left arm, feeling the pain lance through it. The break had healed, but I still felt sore. It was just adding to my many aches. My neck felt better now than it had before, but it was still raw. I reached up and found rough scabs over the wound. It was healing, the blood was helping at least. If I hadn’t been injured with silver, none of these wounds would’ve bothered me much. I shook my head, I had to play with the cards I was dealt with.

Then, I heard a click that made me spin around just in time to see the lock on the chest open and fall to the ground, then turn into dust upon hitting it. I frowned, and the light flashed above the rock, the crack in space widened and turned into a round disk of light, now looking more like what it had been in the last moments when I was pulled in here. Like a rift in space.

I narrowed my eyes, and then walked over to the chest, keeping one eye on the rift. The wooden chest looked as unimpressive from up close as it had from the distance. After just a moment of hesitation, I grabbed the latch and then swung it open.