

## **What Now?**

The day brought with it the weakness that I had experienced before, but also itching in my wounds. Somehow, I could immediately tell that their healing had ground to a halt. Still, it was better than burning up in the sunlight. I grimaced and groaned at the aches in my bones.

Saia stood up straight in an instant.

“Query: The Host’s state has undergone a change, notable reduction in power generation detected.”

“Yeah, about that,” I told her that I was a vampire and how my body worked, that daylight here made me weak.

“Feedback: This Unit understands. Weakness is to be expected out of organics.”

I blinked at her, then narrowed my eyes. “Says the silver goo that was about to die without me.”

“Clarification: This Unit meant no offense.”

“Sure you didn’t,” I told her with a smile. The weirdness of being bonded to an alien piece of tech aside, I had to admit that I felt a lot calmer by having her around. The fear of being alone in this place had been gnawing at me ever since I first woke up.

Suddenly I felt very tired, in a way that I hadn’t felt in a long time. I recognized it a few minutes later as the need to sleep. I hadn’t slept as a human did for years, but all vampires, or most of them at least, fall into

a stasis as the sun comes up. I had been no exception, with every sunrise I would fall into a deep dreamless state.

“Saia,” I said tiredly, realizing that I hadn’t had a rest period in a long while. “I think that I’m about to fall asleep.”

“Feedback: This Unit is familiar with sleep as a biological function, Ke Erzi required it as well. You may sleep, this Unit will keep watch.”

Before I could properly answer her, my eyes closed and I fell into the land of dreams.

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I was dreaming, I knew it from the start. After so many years, it was such an alien experience that I couldn’t help but notice. I also knew that what I was dreaming about was a memory. Two people sat in a beanbag, inside a small college library.

*“Vampires are here to stay,” I said. “And they’ve done a lot of good over the years. Their wealth funded and all but ensured that the Equal Rights Movement took hold in all the major countries. They marshaled the politics that ensured the end to slavery, you cannot say that they haven’t done any good.”*

*“Of course,” Khalil, my old and perhaps only friend said. “But for every good thing that they had done, I could point to a disaster or a tyrant king in the history books. They have become very good at hiding*

*in the modern era, but there are still many things that we should be mindful of when dealing with them. There is still so much that we don't know."*

*He looked at me with steadfast blue eyes framed by bushy eyebrows and neatly trimmed beard. I laughed, more as a way of hiding anything that might've shown on my face. Khalil didn't know about my past, didn't know that I worked for a cartel run by a vampire. He was not one of the people who believed the vampires to be the literal spawn of the devil, he wouldn't be taking Vampire Philosophy Classes if he was. But he was a great skeptic, about everything. It clashed a lot with the cross he always carried with him. It was what I liked about him the most.*

*"Would you judge them all only by the accounts of the past?" I asked.*

*"They are not what they pretend to be Mari," Khalil shook his head. "Remember the words of their great philosopher, Vordin? Given the choice to rule or to watch the human sheep fumble in the dark, was no choice at all. We are eternal, great and powerful, it is our right, nay, our responsibility to guide the fates. Lest the human blight pull this world into a swirling abyss of mediocrity."*

*I grimaced at the quote. It was from one of the few verified written words of an Elder Vampire who had, according to some newer records and research, been a big player in ancient Persia. Also, one of the driving forces behind Darius' and later Xerxes' invasion of Greece. World domination was... sadly something that many of the old vampire stories had in common.*

*"I remember, it still doesn't mean anything," I insisted. "Mans greed needs no whispers in the ear, we are capable of awful things all on our own."*

*Khalil didn't answer anything, instead he grew quiet. Then, after a few minutes he asked a question.*

*"If you had the power they hold, what would you do with it?"*

The dream grew fuzzy before I gave him my answer, but I didn't need to hear it, I remembered.

I opened my eyes to find that I could still feel the sun above me, the day hadn't gone by during my sleep. By the position in the sky, I could tell that it was about midday. I had slept for maybe six hours.

"Query: Status of Host?"

"I'm fine Saia, did anything happen?" I asked.

"Feedback: Nothing to report."

My body still ached, the pain and the wounds were still there, my left hand hurt in particular, but I was feeling more rested at least. I stood up and stretched, feeling my body protesting. A vampire didn't need to exercise, the **thirst** kept our bodies in peak condition, but right now I felt like it was helping.

Once I was done, I turned to look at Saia. "Okay, I think that we should get ready for the night. I'm at my strongest then, and if we are going to explore the ruins that would be the best time for it."

"Feedback: This Unit is in agreement, utilizing the Host's strengths is most optimal."

I smiled at her, she was too cute to be a tiny murder machine, but I had seen her crawl out of a throat. Not to mention the fact that she was an AI-like meld of tech and magic made by dragons and could turn into gray goo that consumed biological matter. Ridiculous, and not terrifying at all.

“I want to try and go into my inner room again,” I told her. “See if I could get a new skill. If you detect another intrusion on your matrix, could you maybe try to follow it or something. I want to see if you could come with me inside of that place. Maybe you’ll get some insights into how all of this works.”

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

“If not, just watch over me. If there is any danger, try to wake me up, cut me if you have to,” I told her. The **thirst** would react if my blood was drawn, I was certain of it.

Saia tilted her head and walked over to rest in my lap, staring at me intently, as I sat down in a meditative pose. I took a deep breath then closed my eyes and focused on my chest and the sensation in there. Again, I felt like I knew how to go there on instinct. I willed myself and felt the pulling sensation return, a moment later I landed inside of the now familiar room.

“Statement: Error detected, compensating.”

I turned and glanced down at Saia standing on the ground next to me. Her eyes were flashing rapidly and her body twitched every few moments.

“Uh, Saia, what’s wrong?” I said as I leaned down, but restrained myself from touching.

The glow of her eyes winked out, and then a few seconds later came back.

“Statement: Reboot completed.”

“You okay there Saia?”

“Feedback: This Unit is within acceptable limits for operational capacity.”

I sighed in relief, there was too much that I didn't know, yet here I was stumbling in the dark. Blindly trying to make sense of it all. If this had done something to Saia, I could've lost my only companion in this place. “What happened?” I asked again.

“Feedback: This Unit is currently operating two separate platforms, one under the influence of a time dilation effect, increased processor load caused an overload. Several engrams and systems are unresponsive within this platform.”

That... did make some sense. I was obviously not leaving the real world when I came here, the same had to be true for Saia. The question now was why was she even able to come here. The bond was the most likely explanation, but I also carried my clothes and weapons too. I checked, and yes, every weapon I had was here as well.

“How much of a time dilation?” I asked.

“Feedback: Time appears to flow approximately three times faster in this place.”

“At least you can watch over me in the real world too,” I said. Time passing in the other reality meant that I should try and not to take long here.

“Do you have any insights into this place?” I asked the dragon.

“Feedback: Negative, this Unit is not familiar with phenomenon, nor is it able to use its systems for scanning. However, it is most definitely a Source Weave effect.”

“Too bad,” I shook my head. I rolled my shoulders, noting that the weakness I had outside didn’t translate here. I felt as if it was still night time, and my full vampire strength was present. There weren’t many clues as to why that was, so I pushed it aside for now and walked over to the Mask. Immediately I noticed changes, it had more elaborate etchings on it, or carvings, I guess. It seemed like its appearance was directly related to whatever Investment and Carvings were. I took a deep breath, then decided to reach out. I hadn’t tried before because I was honestly scared. I didn’t want to do something that might come with a cost that I didn’t know about. Now, having Saia here I felt a bit bolder.

I touched the Mask, and nothing happened. Sighing in relief, I picked it up, then raised it over my face. I felt it snap into place and as I moved my hands away it remained fixed there. It didn’t obscure my vision at all, as if it was perfectly made to be worn by me. Again, I didn’t feel any different.

I reached up and tried to pull it away, immediately, as if it knew my will, it came off.

I frowned. Perhaps I needed Investment? The plaque below it still read as me having zero of it. I shook my head and knelt next to Saia.

“Any idea what this is?” I asked.

She reached out with her snout, touching it, then her tongue flicked out.

“Feedback: The object appears to be made out of incredibly durable and unknown material. Proper examination would require access to all of this Unit’s systems and engrams.”

I grimaced, it was too much to hope that she could give me insights. She seemed just at a loss about everything as I was. I returned the Mask to the pedestal then walked over to the corridor and the main reason why I came here. Just as I suspected, there was now a new door there, made out of brown stone with a large paw print etched into it. I already knew that it would lead to the bear-like animal I fought.

It was now obvious to me what the Mask of the Drainer meant. I got skills from blood, or maybe killing. I glanced at the first door, the one leading to the jungle animal. I wondered how it was there, I hadn’t had a Mask when I fought it. Though perhaps I still had some of its blood in my system by then? I did feel the pressure in my chest back then too, so maybe choosing a Mask didn’t matter?

I shook my head, I wanted to test something out, so I walked over to the second door, the one leading to the monkey. I opened it and looked in, the monkey was there again, staring at the door and me from deep within the cave. Already heading in my direction. Saia walked next to me and I pulled out my knife, waiting for it to come.

Once it leapt and attacked, I moved out of the way then stabbed and dispatched it in a quick manner. As before, its body fell apart into particles, but this time there was no glowing orb left behind. I tsked to myself, it seemed like I couldn’t get more than one skill from them.

I glanced at Saia. “So, do you think that this place goes on forever?” I asked.



Saia tilted her head, looking at the cave around them. “Feedback: Negative, this Unit is 94% certain that this area bends back on itself. Structural elements behind us are the same as those ahead.”

I looked around, trying to see what she had noticed. Then I decided to start walking. It didn’t take long for Saia to be proven right. The cave twisted in a circle that led me back to start. I wondered if the other rooms were like that too.

We walked out and I turned to the new door, I checked my weapons and then pushed it open. Inside was, as expected, the bear-like animal. The environment was the top of the hill, with the same rock in the middle. Though, here I noticed that the edges of the hilltop just cut off, there was nothing beyond it. It was as if the hill was suspended in space, the same as that entire area had been.

What caught my attention was that the animal was sleeping. For a moment I paused and thought about it. Were these animals real, living inside of me? Or were they just remnants, copies of the animals that I had killed. Why was this one sleeping in the first place? I narrowed my eyes then walked over to the first door and opened it. The animal in the jungle stood on a rock in front of the door, already staring at me. It growled, getting ready to fight, but it didn’t move toward me. The last time it had moved only once I entered. I walked over to the monkey door and opened it again. There was no sign of it.

*Maybe it needs time to reappear.*

I stepped in and waited for a few seconds, but there was no change. I walked out, thinking about why the bear-like animal would be asleep. I got back to its door and stepped in stealthily. It didn’t stir.

That was interesting. I didn’t move to attack it, instead I stepped back out of the room again.

Saia trailed after me, obviously curious as to what I was doing, but not saying anything. Something about the state they were in was nagging at me.

“Saia, do you have any thoughts as to why two of these rooms would have occupants already aware and waiting for me, while the other doesn’t?”

“Feedback: More information required.”

“Yeah,” I sighed, bringing a hand to rub my temples. “The bear thing is the most dangerous one of them, the strongest I fought. Why would it be almost defenseless? Why would I have an advantage there when I didn’t against the other two?”

Then it dawned on me. “Oh,” I said. “I was aware of it before it was aware of me, for the two it was the other way around, they ambushed me.”

“Feedback: That is one plausible explanation.”

It felt right to me. Somehow, it made me feel better, that there were some rules that I could learn. “Okay, if we are going to fight it again, we should plan ahead. I don’t know what would happen if I got injured in here,” I said, pulling out my knife. “You said that you can change into any shape? Could you... attach yourself to a weapon like this knife? Add something to it?”

“Feedback: As long as there is sufficient structural mass, any shape is possible.”

I smiled, then we sat down in the corridor and planned.