

The Return

The light dimmed and the disorientation vanished in an instant. I opened my eyes and saw a sight that was both familiar and not.

"You alright Saia?" I asked the little dragon next to me.

She had the stone in her mouth, the gift that Shadow had given her.

"Feedback: Affirmative," she answered, the sound coming from her entire body. One of these days I need to ask her how she did that. A moment later her head morphed, and she swallowed the stone whole, consuming it. I hefted the serpent-tongue spear on my shoulder then left her to it and started looking around.

We were back on Earth, in the same place I was taken from, the courtyard where I had been hanged. I saw the wall where I had been pulled up, and my fingers touched at the scar on my throat, and I felt a phantom pain, an aching there even though the wound had healed.

There were changes all around that were obvious. The hacienda I had once called home stood before me, and the sight of it shook me to my core. A thick vine curled up the side of the house. It was covered in dead leaves. Wildflowers grew between large cracks in the stone path leading to the front door. For a moment I thought that it had been years since I had been here, but then more things started to stand out.

The trees were thicker, their leaves bigger, all the plants looked slightly different than what I remembered them to be. As if they were mutated, and from what Shadow had told me, I knew that was exactly

what had happened. The Source had changed the Earth completely, and the changes haven't even run their full course.

It was night, and the two now familiar moons shone from above. My world was now part of Kirios, a planet that had magic.

I listened closely for any signs of life, and heard only the sounds of nature. That didn't mean that there was nothing nearby.

Carefully, I stepped inside the house. The light from outside carved through the darkness to show that the house was abandoned. Dirt spread from the open door inside across the carpet. It was as if a storm had passed through the home. I walked around, inspecting each room. Everywhere I looked there were signs of being quickly vacated; a half eaten meal in the kitchen, piles of clothes strewn about bedrooms and dust invading even deeper parts like closets. There were also signs of battle. I saw bullet holes in the walls, casings on the ground, pictures knocked down, furniture moved around.

Whatever happened, happened quickly, people weren't prepared for it.

I knelt and picked up one of the casings, noting the dark smudges on its surface. I rubbed on the surface with my finger, and some of the residue flaked off. It looked like rust, but I knew that was unlikely, casings had little iron in them. Then as I pressed gently on it, the casing cracked in my hand. I frowned, then picked up another, only to see the same thing happen.

The blood soaked into the Persian carpets like a watercolor painting. The stain lines stretched and marked the carpet, indicating that something large had been dragged away. I could smell old, coppery blood everywhere in the room.

I made my way to the armory in the basement, taking the stairs down into a hallway that brought back memories. It was cleaner down here, but still covered in dust. The paintings on the walls were as I remembered them, all telling the story of the Cartel Master's arrival in the Americas and his conquests.

Seeing made me worried, it was as if I was looking at the images of the future. Earth had six months before portals opened and allowed other denizens of Kirios access to our lands. That was how long I had to create something that could fight back, something that could endure and protect what Earth was supposed to be.

Shadow had prepared me as best as he could, but ultimately it was going to be on me to make decisions. And I barely an idea how to start. Earth had been savaged by Source for a full month, I shuddered to think what had happened in that time.

There were signs of struggle here as well, casings and bullet holes, drops of blood. No one was killed down here, but they had bled.

I reached the armory and saw it was mostly empty. The racks that used to be filled with rifles and guns were bare, the lockers where Kevlar vests used to be kept were open and empty too. I walked through, and saw a few boxes of ammo on the table, I didn't even need to glance at them to be able to tell that what state they were in, I could smell the rust in the air.

I looked anyway, and saw that all the cartridges were covered with dark red substance. I pulled one out and pressed it. The metal splintered as if it was made out of cheap plastic, and powder spilled onto the table. I scrunched my face as the smell hit me. Something was wrong with the powder too. I didn't have an in-depth knowledge about propellant used in bullet cartridges, but even I could tell that it wasn't supposed to look like that. It was clumpy, as if it had melted into clay.

I turned and searched the rest of the room. One shelf held machetes and knives, and all of them had the same rust-like substance covering them.

I glanced at the weapon on my shoulder, and its almost pristine look. It was made on Kirios, with a metal alloy that I wasn't familiar with. But I was pretty sure that it still had the same metals. I brought the blade close and licked it, then nodded to myself. It did taste like iron. Shadow had warned me that there would be a lot of changes to Earth, and this one seemed to be part of it. Except... It seemed like a big oversight not to mention that our metals would change the properties. All the remaining weapons in the armory were useless, they had turned brittle.

I didn't know how or why, but I did assume that the Source was to blame. I shook my head and walked over to the safe in the back, it was open, and most of the stuff inside was gone. I remembered there being Claymore mines and other explosives inside, but that had obviously been taken. I still checked it, though it seemed like most everything was taken. I had to assume that whatever had happened to the weapons wasn't an immediate change. The people would've had the use of such weapons, for a little while at least.

I sighed and made my way back, stopping to check on other things in the house such as technology. The tv's and computers were dark and with no power, I had no way of checking if they still worked. Though anything that had metal was affected on various levels. Not everything was fully brittle, but almost everything looked affected. From the few picture frames that were made out of metals to kitchen tools and water taps.

I walked through the entire house, until I reached the bedrooms, there I took the time to look through the closets and pick up some clothes. The first room I checked belonged to the Master's mistress, though there wasn't much there that I could, or rather would use. I didn't think that walking the wilderness around in expensive dresses was the right move.

I eventually found a few pants and shirts that fit me well enough, along with a big backpack to keep all of the extra stuff in. I still wanted to check my room and take my own clothes if they were still there, but I didn't have much.

I even went through the draws, taking a look at the jewelry, gold and silver was mostly okay from what I could see. I stayed away from the silver pieces, and took the gold ones along with any pearls and other precious stones. There wasn't much, a lot had obviously been taken when the house was abandoned.

Then I returned to the kitchen and rummaged through the pantry, taking a few bottles of water and some food. I didn't need it, but I might encounter human survivors and I had to be prepared for that.

Saia found me back in the living room, kneeling on the floor and trying to figure out what had happened.

"Query: This was your home?"

I glanced at her and shook my head. "No, it was my master's home. I lived in a shack on the other side of the estate."

Saia tilted her head, but didn't respond to that. "Were you successful?"

As a response Saia's eyes flashed, then a wave of light expanded out of her until it covered us both. I looked around at the familiar sphere.

"It works," I said, excitedly.

"Statement: The engram is operational, though I can detect that it isn't operating in the manner it was intended."

I tilted my head. "Really?"

"Feedback: Affirmative, but it will still aid me in making my own engrams work. I have started rearranging the priority list on engram reconstruction based on what I learned from using this one."

"Does it have a name?"

"Feedback: Shadow referenced it as [Threat Reduction Field]."

"That's a mouthful," I said.

"Feedback: It is an apt name, for its purpose."

I nodded, she was right. The sphere did make it less likely for animals to come near it. It had a mental effect that made them more likely to turn away from the direction where the sphere was at. I was sure that it was going to be useful to us.

"How long can you keep it up?"

"Feedback: This unit takes power from the host, it will remain active as long as you can provide power for it."

I frowned. "It is draining me right now?"

"Feedback: Affirmative, this Unit estimates that it will take several hours until the drain becomes noticeable. The host's body should be able to provide enough power to run it for a bit over a full day. Assuming a recent feeding."

I didn't know if I would ever get over the fact that I was what powered her.

"Well, we don't need it now," I said and she turned the engram off. Together we made our way out of the big house and into the courtyard.

Suddenly, I heard something above me and moved. I jumped forward and spun around swinging the weapon from my shoulder. The blade cut through the neck of the snake that had just lunged at my head. I stepped aside as the head hit the ground and the rest of the snake tumbled down from the rooftop to hit the stone with a heavy and wet sound.

I tilted my head and listened for signs of more danger. Saia took to the air and flew a few loops around me before landing next to me again.

"Statement: I see no sign of more threats."

I nodded, then allowed myself to kneel down and take a look at the dead snake. It looked like a boa, but also it did not. Or at least it was changed. The creature was probably twice the length of any normal boa constrictor, it was massive. Its head was as long as my entire arm, with bone-white ridges above its eyes. The most distinctive feature was the three extra sets of fangs in its mouth. And its body was thicker, almost as thick as my waist. There was also something strange that I only now realized, it had no scent. Somehow I knew that Source was involved with that.

I had known that animals would change with the Source, but I hadn't really imagined what that would look like.

"We are going to need to be very careful Saia," I said. The snake had died quickly, my weapon cut through it easily enough. It wasn't anywhere near the strength of the beasts I fought during my month away, but I still didn't have access to my skills. And that made me extremely paranoid. I had only had my skills for a short time, but I had found that I felt naked without them.

I looked around, seeing the overgrown lawn and the forest nearby. The estate was out of the city, in the wilderness. It was an hour away from the closest village, two from the city, and that was by car. I didn't see any cars

around, so I had to assume that they had been used when this place was abandoned.

What I couldn't tell was the reason why they left. I could imagine their confusion when the Grand Spell took Earth. What Shadow had described sounded so apocalyptic. Earthquakes, mountains torn apart, rivers and oceans siphoned. The weather was supposed to have changed too, though I didn't see much evidence of it now, but then again I had come after everything had settled. I shuddered to think what I was going to discover.

I went back inside and found an empty bottle that I then filled with the snake's blood, taking a bit for myself to quench my **thirst**.

Then we headed to the other side of the estate. I found the shacks where the staff lived easily enough. What I encountered was similar to the main house; blood everywhere, but no bodies. I could only assume that they had been eaten by the animals. I kept my guard up, but I still searched through it. I found nothing that I could use, a few decade old phones which didn't work, clothes, and daggers that were rusted over.

I could feel the sun coming, and I knew that we should find shelter. I didn't think that there was anything in the jungle that could threaten me, but I didn't want to go exploring during the day without my skills. Hopefully, they would return soon. I approached a small shack that used to be my home and entered.

It was as I had left it, no one had disturbed anything. Which made sense, they wouldn't have had the time to clear it out after my imprisonment and execution. It was a simple room, with just a table, a chair, and a bed taking up most of the room. I had a radio on top of a table and a small chest where I kept most of my clothes. I opened it up and took out a few of my own clothes, pants and shirts, and my spare vest. My best set of clothes was the one that had been torn up in Ish Vimza's

jungle. I had never had many possessions. My phone wasn't there, but that had been taken when I was imprisoned.

I walked up to the table and tinkered with the radio, it was one of those old ones that still ran on batteries. Which was a pain in the ass since batteries it used were rarely produced nowadays. Thankfully, I had a set of rechargeable ones. I opened the back and saw that the batteries seemed in good condition, I saw no sign of any degradation. I turned the radio on and was surprised to hear static. I wheeled through the frequencies but didn't hear anything.

Then it sputtered and died, a spark flashing from inside and smoke starting to leave the cheap plastic.

"Damn," I shook my head and put it back.

"Query: What was the purpose of this device?" Saia asked.

"It could receive... communications, I guess. Though I used it mostly for entertainment," I tried to explain a bit about how it worked, but as it turned out Saia understood radio waves a lot better than I did.

"Statement: I am fully capable of monitoring such transmissions. I shall alert you if I detect anything."

"Thanks," I said, I didn't have a lot of hope that she would find anything.

I reached down and picked up a pair of dark sunglasses from my table. I used to use them often when I walked amongst the humans, as a way to blend in more easily. I had learned how to move my body in the more relaxed manner that the humans moved in, but a vampire's eyes often unnerved humans. I've heard the term unblinking often when I was growing up. Now I figured that they would come in handy hiding the color

of my eyes. Anyone taking a look at me would realize that I wasn't human, and as Shadow had taught me, knowledge was power.

I walked back to the chest and rummaged until I found a small black cloth face mask that covered my nose and mouth. Humans used to use them often after the last big pandemic, so seeing someone with one wouldn't be that strange, it would also make it so I didn't need to be that careful with hiding my fangs when talking.

I wanted to help my world, my people, but I also knew the reality of what happened when disaster struck. I had grown up in the poor barrios, I had seen how human baser nature could swim to the surface when times were rough.

If I was going to accomplish my goals, I had to be smart about it. Find a place that can be defended, a base of operations, then find survivors and bring them there. Expand and take back the wild.

I had an advantage because I knew what was coming, and according to Shadow I was probably the highest Invested person on Earth right now. It would be harder for me to gain Investment now, since the quality of blood here was no where near what I had to drink on Ish Vimza, so people would catch up to me, but for now I was ahead. I had to take advantage of that.

I equipped myself as best as I could, a backpack on my back with clothes and supplies, Shadow's dagger at my hip and his serpent-tongue spear in my hands. I put the glasses and the mask in the pocket of my vest, easy to grab but not in the way for now.

Then I looked down at Saia. "Let's go, there are two more places I want to check."

Together we made our way into the forest. It was silent, but for the sound of the wind passing through the trees. The change in the nature was making me have a strange sensation of wrongness. It was as if I couldn't convince myself that I was home, and in some way that was true. I will never be home again, it would never be as it used to.

After a short trek, we found our first destination, a tall wooden wall barred my way, and I jumped, soaring over it with ease. I landed inside the courtyard of the shifter compound. The training yard was as I had remembered it, if a bit overgrown. It was the place where I first learned how to throw a real punch. The shifters had taken me in, even if they had kept me at a distance. I wasn't one of them, but they had helped a young and angry little girl find a place for herself in the cartel.

I sniffed the air and detected the scent of shifters. They had a particular scent that was easy to detect, but it was faint. They hadn't been here in a while.

The shifters served as the main enforcers for the Lágrima Sangrienta Cartel, so this was where I hoped to find weapons, if any remained. I walked through to the main house, noting that it too had been left in a hurry. There were no cars, just like at the main house.

I made my way to their armory, keeping an eye out for anything interesting. The armory was unlocked and open, and I entered to find that it too had been stripped mostly clean. There were a few kabars around, but they were affected just like the other items that had iron in them. As I studied them a bit closer, I saw that these seemed in better state than most others I had seen, though they were still affected.

"Any idea what is causing this?" I asked Saia.

She tilted her head. "Feedback: The effects are consistent with the corrosion effects on certain metals and alloys on Erzi."

I nodded. "I assume that it has something to do with the Source."

Saia tilted her head. "Feedback: Insufficient data, Ke Erzi never considered a possibility of a world without the Source. I cannot ascertain if that is the cause, but it is likely."

"You aren't going to start corroding right?" I narrowed my eyes on her.

"Feedback: Negative," Said responded. "This unit is made out of ferosim, also called the living metal. It does not corrode."

I wanted to dive in more into that, but it was not the time for it.

"But you did have metals or alloys that didn't corrode?" I asked.

"Feedback: Affirmative," she answered as she landed on the table near one of the weapons. She placed one paw on the blade, and I saw it flow to cover it for a few seconds before reforming. "This item contains higher amounts of a material that Ke Erzi used in most of our alloys. It does not corrode."

"Carbon probably," I said. It would explain why these weapons weren't as corroded as the other ones that were predominantly steel. That gave me some hope, even if a lot of our technology was affected, we could still recover it. We would just need to find different alloys and materials that worked better in a world filled with Source.

I continued my search until I found a half opened locker in the corner of the room. I pulled it open fully and saw a case on the bottom shelf. Seeing the symbol etched on the plastic case immediately made my heart beat faster.

I pulled the case out and placed it on the table. The etched symbol was simple, a hammer on an anvil, with H-tech written below it. Hephaestus

Technologies was a vampire led company that specialized in making equipment for both the shifters and vampires.

I clicked the latches up and opened the case to find the weapon still inside. It was a modern revolver, and a model that I recognized. I had used it only once, and that was in practice. It was designated for military use by the shifters in UK's special forces. I knew that the Cartel Master had managed to procure several of these for his enforcers. I didn't know how they left his one behind, but I was lucky.

It didn't look like it was corroded at all, and that was probably because it wasn't made with metal at all. It was dark green and black in color, made out of ceramic and carbon composites.

I pulled it out and pushed the cylinder out, noting the eight chambers waiting to be loaded. The H-tech Rhino Model 3 was a big weapon, slightly oversized for my hand, but I could manage it. It more resembled a hand cannon than it did a regular handgun. I knew that it had a kick that would shatter a human hand easily, and it probably had something to do with .600 caliber bullets that it used. I glanced down at the small ammo box in the case and opened it only to be immediately disappointed.

The bullets had corroded, they were useless.

"Damn," I cursed. Saia leaned down to inspect the bullets, and I sighed. It was too good to be true, and by now I was sure that I just had rotten luck in life. Still, I should've known, there was no reason for its bullets to be still functional. I had already seen that even the powder in the cartridges was affected.

Still, if someone ever figured out a new type of propellant, the weapon would be useful. Just as I was about to put the weapon back in its case, I got an idea.

"Hey Saia," I started. "What are the chances that you could have your drone make me ammo for this thing?"

Saia took a look at the ammo in the box then answered. "Feedback: The shape would be easy enough, though I do not understand the way that it was meant to be used."

Quickly, I explained how the guns worked, and what a bullet needed in order to be fired.

"Feedback: I can create this ammunition, but it would be useless. I cannot recreate this propellant."

I grimaced, then thought about it for a bit. "So, if you made me an arrow, I could obviously fire it out myself?"

Saia nodded, but I wasn't really paying attention as I was thinking of the ways that I we could make it work. "Hey," I started. "How do you move, or rather how does your drone move?"

"Feedback: This drone moves mechanically, through the use of limbs and wings. It is analogous to the way your own body moves. It has artificial muscles that enable movement. In the relaxed form, it flows through the use of nanosized individual units."

Though I didn't fully understand, I did get the picture. "But you can't just shoot yourself in a direction, right?"

"Feedback: Not without leverage, and not as fast as this weapon of yours requires."

I shook my head, the sun was nearly out, and I had one more place to visit before daylight arrived. *I'll need to think some more about this.*

I stored the weapon back in its case, and then put it away in my backpack. Then we headed back into the forest, heading towards my sire's old home.