

A New Day

The night fell as we walked to the river. I paused and let the feeling pass over me, relishing in the return to my full strength. The pain around my neck flared, a reminder that the silver inflicted wound was yet to fully heal. My other wounds, though had recovered, in part because of the blood of the mature ferrorn as Shimi had called it, for which I was grateful.

“You well?” Shimi asked.

I nodded my head. “Yes,” I whispered. “Much better.”

He tilted his head, but didn't question. We continued on our way through the jungle.

The trip to the river was uneventful, though I had to hold myself back from twitching every time I heard a strange rustle in the distance. And the sounds of the birds, or what I assumed were birds at least. Some sounded like the wailing of the damned, if such a thing had a sound. Others were close to what one might encounter on Earth, yet also distinctly not. Most sounds had a deeper tone to them that grated on my ears. I could hear in a range that was lower than what a human could, and the last few days had me experiencing things that I had never experienced before. Not just sounds, new smells, even colors. The jungle was as such an assault on the senses that I almost had to consciously focus on not getting overwhelmed.

But I still couldn't help but twitch at unfamiliar sounds. Almost dying does do that to you, and almost dying three times in just as many days at that. I heard the river before we reached it. The two of us stepped from among the trees to see a beautiful waterfall, with a small pool and the

river flowing out of it. The water reflected the two moons from above, one blue and one red, giving the water a strange mix of the two colors. It was a heavenly and beautiful scene.

“You should hurry,” Shimi said. “There are predators around.”

“Is there anything in the water?” I asked, looking at it askance.

He glanced at it, and his right ear twitched. “Nothing that should worry you.”

That was... an acceptable answer, it wasn't like I had much of a choice. I wanted to be clean. I grabbed the hem of my shirt, and then paused.

“Can I get some privacy, please?”

He met my eyes, then looked around. His ears turning around independent of each other, which was... both adorable and weird at the same time. “It is dangerous, but... I will be nearby.”

I blinked and he was gone.

“Okaaaay,” I said. He was... definitely a lot faster than I thought. Which worried me again. He was faster than a vampire, my eyes couldn't even track him. I looked around and saw no signs of him. Though, for all I knew, he hid himself and was looking anyway. Not that I could do anything about it. I decided to risk it.

I sighed and pulled my clothes off, then I entered the water. I submerged and sighed in contentment as the cold water washed over me. A vampire didn't feel the cold in the same way that a human did. Our blood was different, we didn't require a certain temperature in order to function properly. I emerged from my dive and pulled the hair out of my face. It was long, just past my shoulders, and I made a mental note to

shorten it a bit. I rubbed my body, scraping the blood with my nails, wincing when I got to my neck where I could feel the scars. Silver was the only thing that left scars on a vampire's body, and the scars we had from before we were turned. I had two bullet scars from before, one on my upper left thigh and one on my stomach. Now, I had a new scar to add to the collection, a burn ring around my neck. I grimaced when I touched it as it was still sore to the touch. It would take a while for it to fully heal.

I pulled my hands back, and focused on the rest of my body, trying to hurry the process up. I didn't want to stay in the water for longer than was necessary. I didn't know what else was out there, and even with Shimi around I wasn't convinced that we were perfectly safe. Still, once I figured that my show of bathing was enough, I brought my wrist close to my head and whispered in a barely audible tone.

“Saia, you there?”

“Feedback: Affirmative,” she replied in the same manner. Her voice barely audible even to my ears.

I sighed in relief. “I want to have a chat, but for now please stay quiet. Monitor our surrounding for any threats, and if Shimi tries anything warn me or just attack if you see an opportunity.”

“Feedback: Understood.”

I submerged once more, then walked out of the pool. I twisted my hair, draining as much of the moisture as possible, and then jumped from foot to foot quickly, shaking as much of the water off my body as I could. I walked over and realized that there was a second set of shirt and trousers next to the ones that I had taken off. Shimi had to have put them there. I won't say that my first thought was that he was spying on me, because it wasn't. It was a worry that he heard my conversation with Saia.

There was nothing that I could do if he had, so I focused on my second thought. Which was about just how fast and stealthy he had to be in order for me not to detect him. My hearing was extremely sharp. I put the clothes on. My old garments were ripped and useless, I bunched up and took them with me. No way was I leaving my scent around for animals to get a good sniff at.

Before I even tried to call out, he was there, standing in front of me. That sent a chill down my spine. I was used to seeing people coming long before they could become a threat.

“We should head back,” Shimi said. “The deeper the night gets, the more beasts come out that we really do not want to encounter right now.”

I nodded my head, understanding. There wasn't much that I could say to that. Together, we started making our way back to his camp.

“So,” he started. “I see that I have misjudged you. You are much stronger during the night. Is it a skill or is this unique to your kind?”

I was still not quite sure if that was information that I should share. He hadn't even offered to tell me what he was. “Is that important to know?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, but then turned back and spoke. “If I am to help you survive this place, I need to know as much as you are comfortable with sharing. I understand that we are strangers, it is only natural for you to be reticent. Right now, I can tell that you are strong and fast from the way you move. Very few races that arrive on Kirios are as strong as you are. As an Exemplar you cannot have already gotten more than a few Carvings at best. That means that your physical capabilities are your advantage. At the moment, based on your physical strength and healing, I would put you on an equal level as a combat focused Masked in their Second Investment. Though of course, you don't

have the skills that they do, so that means that you probably would not be much of a challenge for someone who knew what they were doing. And each race has its own advantages and disadvantages. Naga-shan live underwater and never stop growing for as long as they live. Dwarves are masters of stone and have an almost perfect sense of the earth.”

Naga-shan? Dwarves? I guess that this truly was a different world. Not that a hundred other things hadn't already convinced me.

“Your strength will help you survive in this place, but only if you are smart, and if you stay with me. Alone, you will die, despite your advantage.”

The way he said it was a hard for me to accept, it was a tone that broached no disagreement. That stung a bit. But I understood what he was trying to illustrate for me. I knew nothing of this world. And I had a mission to accomplish. The revolting sense of despair that the vision instilled in me was still there. I had to survive, learn more, then make decisions to prevent what I saw from happening.

“I know that Investment means more power, but what is it really?”

“Investment is... a measure of one's life you could say. People spend their entire lives improving their Masks and with them their lives. A Second Investment Farmer would be able to do more than one in their First Investment, and so they would be able to produce more, bring more income. Have a better life. It stays true for every type of Mask. Combat Masks enter into the service of nobles or rulers, merchants or mercenary bands. The higher their Investment, the more valuable they are. Higher Investment also means more capstone skills, which are defining skills per the Investment tier. Very powerful skills. But for most people reaching Third Investment is an achievement of a lifetime.”

“A lifetime...” I wondered how my life would look now. This Earth shattering event had freed me, in a way. It saved my life and gave me an opportunity to do anything that I wanted. The Cartel had attempted to execute me, would’ve succeeded if not for what happened. They had severed the bonds that tied us together, at least in my opinion. “I understand,” I said slowly. “I have only one skill,” I told him. “It is an active skill and not tied to any of my physical attributes.”

That much I felt I could reveal, for now at least.

Shimi glanced back, then nodded. “I hope that you will be willing to share at least what kind of investment your Mask requires, it would help me know how to best help you.”

I was still not quite sure if that was information that I should share. I wondered if he was genuine, or if he was just prying. He hadn’t even offered to tell me what his was. “Why is it so important?”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, but then turned back and spoke. “As I said before, the type of Mask you have might mean the difference between a life of wealth or one of struggling. Some people do not share their Masks because if you know what someone’s Mask is, you might also know what skills they have. And what they need to do in order to advance. Masks have been around for forever, most of them had been cataloged and the best ways of progressing them discovered. People with the same Mask might have different skills, but they will all draw from the same pool—in most cases. There are exceptions to all rules. There are rules about revealing your Mask, for most it is inevitable. Just by living their life, it will become known. Though the exact name might not be revealed. A Mask evolves as it grows. A Mask of the Farmer might eventually become the Mask of Pestilence Immune Crop Farmer. You see, details matter, the name would tell someone what the Mask could do. You do not need to tell me the name of your Mask, but knowing how you gained investment would help me a lot.”

Well, I was not a farmer material. “And you aren’t going to tell me what your Mask is?”

“I shall tell you how I gain investment, thought that alone puts me at risk. Our entire society revolves around our Masks. They are a sign of prestige, you may reveal your type, rather that is easily discovered just by seeing what someone’s Mask looks like. But the name? That is a different story; the exact name can tell someone a lot more than just knowing that you have a warrior type Mask. To you, the name of my Mask would not mean a lot. You don’t have the knowledge for it to even make sense. But eventually, if you survive and leave this place, if you reach your lands and live until they are fully integrated. Then, you will meet people that come from various parts of Kirios. And the name of my Mask would mean a lot to them.”

“Why would I just reveal it? I’ve no reason to, I don’t even know who you are.”

He told her. “True, the risk is minuscule,” he glanced back over his shoulder. “But I did not get to be as old and as powerful as I am by taking risks that I did not need to.”

I tilted my head. “And how old are you exactly?”

“Old,” he chuckled.

He didn’t look it, nor did he really act it. There was a mischievous air about him, though yes, he did tend to speak a bit slower and more formal. But I didn’t know anything about him or his people, so I couldn’t tell what old meant in his context. Though, even on Earth, old was a matter of perspective. The Master of the Cartel was hundreds of years old, an Elder Vampire, but there are those who are far older than him. There were only a very few Ancient Vampires left in the world, but they had seen empires rise and fall.

“What’re you actually? Your people, race, if you can tell me that much?”

He paused, and then started to talk. “To most of the world, I am a YoKai-ni, that is the name used to refer to the three races that arrived to Kirios together from the same world called Asha Kai-ni. Three races, though the YoKai-ni races are not closely related.”

That surprised me. “Really? Three completely separate intelligent races evolved on the same world?” Earth had the same, except that all three races were in fact related.

“Well, intelligent is still a matter of some debate,” he chuckled.

I frowned.

“Apologies, that was a... inside joke, in bad taste, and not a very good one at that,” he shook his head. “I have been away from people for too long. Regardless. Three races, the Oni-yi, the Kitsu-oi, and the Tengu-gi. Each different, and each with its own strengths and weaknesses. I am a child of a Kitsu-oi and a Tengu-gi, most people call those like me Tsu-gi, or if you wish to insult me, then Oiyi-gi.”

“Wait,” I started. “Didn’t you say that your races were completely different, how...”

“Kitsu-oi can have children with any race on Kirios, they are sexless, but most people refer to them as female as that is how they most often appear. They can... mold their body in between the two. They usually prefer to mate with other races, and not with their own kind, and only one in five children born are pure blood Kitsu-oi, the rest are hybrids such as me.”

“Are such hybrids common?” I asked, hoping that I wasn’t being too intrusive, but it was interesting. If I understood correctly, the Kitsu-oi were something like hermaphrodites.

“They are, mostly they live among their father races, since Kitsu-oi are solitary people. Though they are not always accepted, based on where they are.”

Suddenly, he paused, his ears swiveling.

“What is—” I froze, as I heard it too.

Before I could react, his arm came up and pushed me away with a strength that surprised me. I flew and hit the tree behind me, the impact making me lose my breath and sight for a moment. I fell to the ground and by the time I opened my eyes again, I saw a monster.

A massive beast had caught Shimi around the torso in its jaws. It looked like a blue alligator, or an ancestor of one, with bone spikes coming out of its back. It shook its head, as Shimi grunted. Something flashed in his hand, and then there was a burst of red light, and an exchange that was too fast for me to see.

[Mist Mirror; Quick Slash]

The beast was dead, its head cut from its shoulders.

I stood as Shimi untangled himself from its jaws, revealing massive puncture wounds all over his chest and stomach. His clothes were ruined.

“Blight take it!” He cursed, then turned to look at me, his expression pained. “I guess that I am going to be the one needing help,” his face changed as he spoke, and then he grinned at me. But in his eyes, I saw something that I hadn’t seen in him since the moment we met, fear.

The wounds on Shimi’s torso were deep. I saw his pink blood flowing slowly out of the puncture wounds. I ran over quickly and knelt down next to him. As I leaned closer, I could see something black and sickly all around the wounds. The scent of his blood hit me hard, I could feel the **thirst** rearing its head from deep within me. I pushed it away as my training took over and I reached for the water gourd at his waist.

“Blights,” Shimi whispered as I pulled his shirt up and poured water over the wounds, trying to clean the stuff out. He sucked in a breath and winced. “It caught me off guard.”

“Can you walk?” I asked. “I need to clean the wounds, bandage them. You must have medical supplies back at the camp?”

Shimi looked above my head. “I got reckless,” he said.

He wasn’t listening to me, and his eyes were losing focus. I cursed as I glanced back at his wounds, then turned back at the corpse of the monster. Was it poisonous? Was that what the black stuff was?

“A blighted Sixth Investment monster ambushed me... ashes under the Old Tree... I must be getting too old.”

“Hey,” I snapped my fingers in front of his eyes. He blinked, then looked up at me. “Focus, we need to get back to the camp.”

The power that I had just seen, that monster. I was convinced now of his words. I couldn’t survive in this place alone, not even at night. I was out of depth, ignorant of the rules. I had to keep him alive. I wondered if

I could go and search for medical supplies back at the camp, but... I didn't want to risk another monster finding him like this. I reached down and put my arm beneath his armpit, then pulled him up.

"Hijueoputa," I bit out as he leaned his full weight on me. He wasn't that heavy, but he was bigger than me.

I glanced at the corpse of the monster, the blue blood drawing my eyes. I felt a pang of the **thirst**, but I pushed it away again. Turning my head, I pointed us in the direction of the camp and started walking, focusing on keeping Shimi upright. His bleeding had slowed, which was the only reason why I decided to risk having him walk. But I did not like the vacant look in his eyes.

"What was it doing here?" He whispered, almost slurring his words. "Reapers don't come this far out of the inner ring."

His words started to lose meaning, and I ignored his ramblings. I kept my eyes and mind focused on getting us to camp.

I didn't know how long it took us to reach the camp, I just hoped that it wouldn't be too late. By the time I put him down on a cot next to the fireplace and somehow managed to push his nine tails out of the way so that he could lay comfortably, he lost consciousness, and was burning up. I scrambled to the chest next to the tent, opening it up and looking through it. Most of the things inside were spare clothes, some water gourds and things that I couldn't identify. I left the chest and entered the tent. Inside was a small bed frame which was missing the bedding—I assumed that he had moved the cot to the outside. There were two chests nestled in a corner, and a rack with weapons in another. I took note of the unfamiliar looking weapons, but turned my attention to the two chests.

I opened the first one and found writing supplies and books, without digging too deep I turned to the other one. This one had vials filled with liquids of different colors. That was a lot more promising, I pulled a few out and looked at the labels. Each was labeled by an image.

One was an open eye, which I dismissed immediately. It implied to me something that would keep the person who drank it awake. Another was a droplet, which I put aside since I didn't know what exactly it could mean. The last was a curved line, thicker on one and narrow on the other. I squinted and decided that it did look a bit like a fang. Did that mean poison? Shimi didn't seem like someone who would come to a place like this unprepared for it. Having an antidote readily available would make sense. I searched through the chest some more, making sure that there were no vials with any other type of symbols. I found a small box that had what I assumed was a weird sewing kit, and clean bandages.

I took the box and one of the vials then went back to Shimi. He was shaking, and sweating a vile black substance. I had no way of knowing if that was what his sweat normally looked like or if it was a side effect of the wound. I took one piece of a clean bandage, ripped a chunk of it and then poured water over it. Then, I knelt down and cleaned his chest, then rolled him to his side and did the same for his back. I poured water and cleaned the wounds again, noting that the wounds had pulsing black vein-like webs around the edges. His blood was pink, so I assumed that was something that came from the monster. I opened the vial that had what looked like a fang on it and sniffed at the clear liquid. Its scent was alien to me, and I couldn't tell if it was foul or not. I glanced back at Shimi and tried to decide what to do.

“Hey, Shimi?” I slapped his cheek gently, trying to have him wake up and ask him what to do. He only murmured something too softly for me to hear.

“Saia,” I whispered. “Could you help him somehow?”

“Feedback: Unlikely, unknown physiology.”

I looked at the pulsing wounds and made a decision.

I uncorked the vial and poured a little of it down his throat, then watched him for any kind of signs. After a while, of nothing happening I gave him some more. He seemed like he had calmed down, and I used thread and a strange spiral needle to close his wounds before bandaging them. Once I was finished, I walked a few steps back and fell on my behind, feeling mentally exhausted. I sat and watched him through the night, praying that he survived.