

We're Fucked

I watched all through the night, until the sun rose, then through the next day. I was worried there for a bit and had feed him the potion two more times. But as the sun set again I was convinced that his state wasn't deteriorating. I sucked in a breath as a shiver of the setting sun ran through me. My strength returned, my world sharpened, all was well again. I pushed myself out and got up from my place across from Shimi, walking over and kneeling next to him. He was still sweaty and shivering. I jumped into motion. I found a blanket in his tent, then I wiped the sweat off and covered him. I made him drink some water, and then I made a small fire. The night was colder than the day in this place. I didn't know how smart it was to build a fire, but the campsite had a fireplace so I assumed that the magic around the camp would somehow make them less likely to be seen—or something.

After I was finished, I realized that the gourd was empty, we had no water. I debated for a few moments, and then decided that we couldn't go without it. I needed it to clean his wounds, and with how much he was sweating he could get dehydrated.

I grimaced, then made a decision. I gathered my weapons and prepared to head out. I rummaged through the chest outside until I found something resembling a backpack, then I filled it with water gourds. The gourds themselves were wood, I was pretty sure.

With one last glance at Shimi I left the safety of the camp. I ran through the forest, heading back to the river.

“Saia,” I started as I ran. “Back there, when that monster injured me. You did something, didn't you?” I asked. I had been going over it for the

last day while watching Shimi. It was daylight, I shouldn't have been able to heal at all.

“Feedback: Affirmative, after the failure of the [Plasma Shot] engram, this Unit has expanded the engram categories with priority for reconstruction. With the failure of combat engram's functionality they have been replaced in favor of support ones. Once injured, the [Repair] engram activated, sending pieces of the biostructural mass through the Hosts bloodstream in order to aid in the biosystems repair. The effectiveness was at sub 5%, the synchronization rate between this Unit and the Host is currently too low for the use of the engram at its full capacity.”

“Well, I think that it saved my life,” I told her. “It kept me alive for long enough to get blood, and kick start the **thirst's** regeneration. Thank you.”

“Feedback: Survival of the Host is required for the survival of this Unit.”

I chuckled. “What do you think about what Shimi told me, about Masks and everything else?”

“Feedback: The information matches what this Unit has observed. Source increases within Host detected with every kill and blood ingestion. This matches the information provided by the Shimi individual, and his explanations of Investment. The Grand Spell's actions in salvaging other worlds and their populations, likewise matches what the Host and this Unit have experienced.”

I nodded, things were starting to make more sense. I was brought here ahead of my world, with Earth soon to follow, in a way that would change it forever. I didn't know how much I trusted what Shimi said would happen, but I had to act as if it was the truth. My main goal was survival,

and that had not changed, only now I knew that I had to survive for 30 days in order to get back on familiar ground. Less than that by now.

But while survival was the most important, figuring out the threat that I witnessed in the vision and the prophecy was something that I had to do too. I had to learn more about the blight that Shimi spoke about.

I continued walking, carefully watching the looming jungle above me. It unnerved me, the way that it looked like it was a jungle on the scale of giants. They reminded me a bit of giant redwoods, if they were three times as thick and half as much tall. The branches spread wider, intermingling with those of other trees to create a thick canopy that resembled a thick lightning spreading in all directions. There was a weight all around me that oppressed with the sheer size. The jungle was old, I knew now, it probably had something to do with that as well.

I looked up, wishing that I could see the two moons above. I had always liked gazing at the moon on Earth. With the sun denied to me, it was the closest thing I could get to it, seeing its reflected light. The two moons on this world were just as beautiful, I wished that I had the time to properly look at them.

In what seemed no time at all, I came upon the corpse of the monster that Shimi had killed. It looked like a blue crocodile the size of a car, with longer limbs and shark like teeth. Its hide was rough, appearing to me almost like a turtle shell, one that was a lot more flexible. I paused as the scent of blood reached my nostrils. It sang of power, and I knew that it had to be depleting fast. The longer the blood stayed dead, the less useful it would be, and I was hungry. I knelt next to it and pulled one of its limbs up, then I bit down.

I frowned as I felt the tough skin repel my teeth. That had never happened before. I tried to bite harder, but the result was the same. With a frown, I pulled out a gourd and walked around to the wound on the

neck. The blood had pooled on the ground, but I rolled the monster around and squeezed some more blood into the gourd. I couldn't get much, but what I did get, I downed immediately. The thick liquid poured down my throat, the slight stale taste barely there. I felt power, its memories flashed through my head but were too disconnected for me to get anything really useful as the monster was dead. Then, I felt something deep inside of me, in my chest.

Mask of the Drainer — No Investment; 6th Carving

[Empty Slot] skill gained.

A new skill, another [Empty Slot], I smiled, but then thought more about it. I gained another Carving, two this time. I tried to figure out why I gained two now. The young ferrorn I killed when I arrived had been before I gained a Mask, but I was 1st Carving when I got it. The monkeys had pushed me to the 2nd Carving. The bear-like beast had given me two, pushing me to 4th. Then came the mature ferrorn, which gave me 5th, and then this one 7th. Was there some logic there that I wasn't seeing. The most obvious thing that I could think of was that the power of the blood mattered. The young ferrorn and the monkeys had been either relatively equal or weaker than me. The bear-like thing I fought was stronger, but it was ultimately an animal, and I had weapons and Saia. The mature ferrorn was beyond me, and I drank its blood after it was dead, killed by someone else, this other creature—the Reaper—was the same. I didn't kill either of them, but they were according to Shimi a lot stronger than me. 4th and 6th Investment compared to me, who had none yet.

It sounded right to me.

Still, the new skill would help me greatly, I resolved to slot in a new one once I returned to Shimi.

“Saia, you want to consume it?” I pointed at the corpse.

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

She surged from my wrist and turned into goo falling onto the corpse. I saw her moving over the corpse, but saw no black smoke rising. Then, after a few second she flowed to the ground into her dragon shape.

“Statement: This unit is not able to consume this biomatter.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“Feedback: Biomatter’s structural integrity too great to be taken apart.”

I narrowed my eyes, remembering not being able to bite through the skin. I pulled out my knife and leaned it on the corpse, trying to stab. After a few unsuccessful tries I pulled back and looked at Saia.

“I guess that Investment does more than we thought,” I said, I couldn’t imagine what would’ve happened if this beast had attacked me. If I couldn’t even scratch it...

Well, there was nothing for us to do here it seemed. Saia moved back to my wrist, and we continued on to the river.

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I returned quickly after I filled the gourds, and thankfully without any trouble. Once I was close enough to the protective spell I paused. I could see into it, see the low fire burning as I had left it. What I couldn't do was hear it. I tilted my head and passed through, immediately the sound of crackling wood reached my ears. *Good to know that it blocks out sound*, I thought to myself. I didn't know how the spell worked, but Shimi had said that it would keep most things around them away. I walked into camp, my eyes seeking Shimi.

I found him where I left him, and saw that his eyes were open, staring at the canopy above them.

"You are alive," I sighed in relief.

"Surprisingly," Shimi said. "I should not be, the Reaper's bite is venomous. Few survive it, even those on my Investment. And those that do often wish that they had not."

"I gave you what I thought was an antidote—"

"You did well," Shimi said, his eyes still on the canopy. "You used the one marked with the fang, yes?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"It might have helped," Shimi turned to meet her eyes. "I am sorry, I made a mistake, and both of us will suffer for it."

"You're alive, that's all that matters," I told him.

He shook his head. "I survived, my body fought the venom off, but... this will weaken me for months, years even. I can not protect us against what is out there anymore. A ferrorn like the one I rescued you from could kill me with ease now. That Reaper was not supposed to be there, and if

other monsters from the inner ring are now leaving it... We can not survive a single encounter with them.”

There was a finality to his words, a sense of giving up.

I had faced certain death several times over the last few days. Like him, I had accepted it, and yet I still lived. No, I said to myself, I was not going to die here. I was finally free to find my path. I was not going to have it cut short before I discovered all that I could be.

“I’m not going to die in this godforsaken place, you hear me hijueputa,” *son of a bitch*. I told him.

Shimi’s lip curled into a weak and sad smile. “Tenacity, it can often get you far. But not here, not now. I regret that you have been dealt such a fate.”

I flashed back to the prophecy, to the vision. There was a darkness prepared by fate already, perhaps what I have seen wouldn’t happen for a thousand years, perhaps it would come to pass tomorrow. I wouldn’t let him or a message from a dead race force me to live in fear as before. It coalesced for me, I would struggle, I would survive. Vampires always did.

“Fuck your *sorry*,” I walked up to him, then loomed over, glaring at him. “I said that I wasn’t going to die here, and I won’t. If you can’t keep us safe, then you’re going to help me do it for the both of us.”

Shimi closed his eyes. “Perhaps if we were anywhere else, but... you are not even on your first Investment, no matter what your natural gifts are... the gap is just too wide.”

“Then I’m going to get stronger,” I said.

Shimi opened his eyes and looked up at the faint light of the two moons above them barely peering through, one red and the other blue. “If only Masks improved with such ease. Investment is an effort of years Marianna, and no matter what kind of a Mask you have, you will have a hard time investing in it in this place.”

“You don’t know how my Mask improves; you don’t know what my Mask is at all.”

He turned his head to meet my eyes but didn’t speak.

I had struggled with trusting this stranger, even with him saving my life. But he was hurt because he saved me, again, he pushed me out of the way. He had not even mentioned it, that I was the reason he was hurt. I was certain that without me none of this would’ve happened to him. I might not trust him yet to speak on what I had seen in the ruin, but I knew that if I was going to survive, I would need to trust him, at least a little.

“My Mask, is the **Mask of the Drainer.**”

He frowned his vacant eyes clearing a bit as he turned to meet my gaze. “**Mask of the Drainer?**” He asked. “I am unfamiliar with that. What does it do?”

I looked at him, and decided that I needed to snap him out of this depressed state he had fallen into. “I have two skills, both are called [Empty Slot]. I gain Investment from drinking blood, which I need to live as all vampires do. I get skills from the blood I consumed, a room appears in my inner room—what you called soul space—where a copy of the blood source can be found. I need to kill them in there in order to gain a skill from them. I don’t know if the skills I get are random or if there is some logic behind it. Right now, I have [Lesser Strength], [Debilitating Wave], and [Lesser Leap] which I can switch out.”

He frowned. “Seventh Carving already? You couldn’t have been here for more than a couple of days.”

I nodded. “I don’t know what is considered normal. And I drank the blood of that beast you killed, the reaper.”

“That certainly isn’t normal, not in normal circumstance. Perhaps for a very specific Mask in a very specific situations. A soldier in active war, fighting where the conflict was the greatest, against enormous odds and surviving would perhaps see such growth,” he tried to sit up and grimaced. I leaned down and helped him sit up.

“I think that I know why,” he said, looking up at me. “You are too weak for the threats here, all of the blood you drank probably had been so far above you in Investment. The reaper alone is in the peak of the Investments of all the Masked in the world. The difference between you probably netted you more Investment. That will lessen as you gain power and if you fight monsters near your own Investment.”

That made sense, I had already suspected as much.

“Your Mask, it probably works like some Mage Masks, maybe like an Invoker. They have never been properly documented. A pure Invoker Mask is hard to advance, and there have never been enough successful Invokers for that Mask to be properly documented and researched. And those that do know guard their knowledge. I have heard stories though, they have ritual skills that let them draw skills from others, from animals, elementals, even people. I assume that your race’s peculiarity made it like what it is.”

He looked down at his bandaged chest, then up at me.

“I didn’t,” I said before he could ask.

“But you could if you wanted to?” He tilted his head. I didn’t know what he was thinking, his expression was too even.

I decided not to lie about that. I nodded. “Vampires feed mostly on the blood of humans, another race on my world. I have no evidence to believe that yours wouldn’t work,” if its scent was anything to go by, his was definitely the most powerful I have encountered so far.

“Do you need to kill in order to feed?” He asked.

I shook my head. “No, we usually only need a glass worth every few days. Long ago, it would happen. Vampires would hunt and kill their victims in order to feed. Nowadays we have blood banks, most of us drink donated blood.”

He held my gaze, then nodded. “Thank you for telling me.”

He seemed to have heard the truth in my words. There was one thing that I did want to ask him about. I described what happened the last time I fought for a skill. How I felt the injury even after I left that place.

He grimaced. “Everyone’s soul space is different. It is shaped by who we are and what our Mask is. While that place might be of the soul, it is real. I have heard stories of some Invokers often being found unresponsive, their eyes blankly staring into nothingness after their ritual skills. They die sometime after being befallen by such a fate. I am going to assume that like you they had to do something in order to secure the skill. It would not be wrong to assume that if you die in your soul space, you will most likely die in the real world too.”

I gulped, that was good to know. I had to be a lot more careful, and should probably make sure that I was ready before I tried to enter rooms with monsters that I hadn’t killed myself.

“Your skills though,” he started. “Yes, that can work. It is going to be hard, probably the hardest thing you have ever done. But if you agree to do as I say, perhaps the both of us can survive this.”

My expression turned grave; I understood the gravity of the situation. “I promise to give it my best,” I told him.

He closed his eyes, then nodded. “And I pledge to do all in my power to make you stronger, to help you survive.”

There was an understanding between the two of us, I could see it in his eyes. A promise was made, and it mattered to him. They were both in this together.

“Does this mean that you are going to tell me your name?” I asked with a smile.

A shadow of his usual playfulness appeared on his lips. “I will tell you my name, if we survive this.”

Well, I had to try.

“But you have shared with me, so it is only fair I do the same,” he sighed. “My Mask’s name is Mirror Mistweaver of the Old Ways.”

I blinked. “I have no idea how you think that someone knowing that would give them an advantage.”

He burst into laughter, then winced and put a hand over his chest. “That is because you lack context. Suffice to say, my investment comes from two things, fighting and knowledge.”

I nodded. “What now?”

“We cannot waste any time,” Shimi started. “The goal is to get you as strong as we can in the next two weeks here, then start the journey south to the shore when I am recovered enough for that trip. I have a boat stashed on the coast. This area is relatively safe, which is why I chose it for my camp, or at least it was supposed to be. The highest Investment the animals and monsters here are is around Third and Fourth Investment. The reaper was greater than that, at Sixth Investment, it was a beast from the inner ring, and those rarely leave the vicinity of the blight curtain. Something had disturbed them, and while I would very much like to know what that something is, we are in no shape to investigate.”

He shook his head. “No, hunting is the plan. This had been the territory of the ferrorn that I killed, meaning that there should not be any other predators that are as dangerous in the area. But there are plenty other animals around, you are going to hunt them and drink their blood. Get more carvings for your Mask and hopefully more skills. If we can get you to your first Investment you should get your first capstone skill, which will be a big jump in power for you. We have a month before you are sent back, and as weak as I am, I will not survive without you. So, in two weeks we will attempt the trek across the continent, get me to my boat and safety and get you ready for your return to your home. Hopefully you will be strong enough by then to protect us both.”

No pressure it seemed. I shuffled my feet uncomfortably; he was going to depend on me. I had a debt toward him for saving my life. My sire’s teachings echoed inside my head. Honor was one of the most important things that he taught her. It was why seeing his disappointment hurt so much.

“Capstone skill?”

“A Mask can gain a skill at any Carving. Most people gain one or two skills per an Investment tier. Some get more, but those are rare, require a very high quality of investment. But, once every Investment starting

from First Investment you will get a capstone skill for that tier. It is a more powerful skill, a defining skill if you will. You will understand more once you get one.”

I nodded. “Where do I start?” I asked.

“First, there are things you need to know about your Mask,” Shimi started. “When you arrived and gained your Mask, you had to choose from several choices, yes?”

I nodded.

“The choices you didn’t pick, were they still available to you in some form?”

I described the three pillars and the plaque, and Shimi nodded.

“Yes, the center pillar is obviously your Mask. The other two are called Ornaments. You can only ever have two Ornaments at a time. And they act as something of sub-Masks. Which Ornaments are available to you depends on your knowledge and life experience. An Ornament will not be able to improve beyond the Second Investment, and all its skills will be lesser than those of a Mask of the same type. But every time your Mask evolves into a new Investment tier there is a chance for your Ornament to consolidate into your Mask, improving it further. This is of course dependent on how synergistic your Ornaments are with your Mask. Ornaments have their own investment requirements, and are an important part of everyone’s path, they can elevate your Mask, or even help you change it.”

I thought back on what choices had been given to me. I had already suspected that they were based on my life. They painted a picture of a sad life.

“So I should pick something?”

“Preferably before you reach First Investment, you might be able to consolidate at least one of them, if they are synergistic enough with your Mask.”

“I don’t know if they are, synergistic I mean,” I said.

“May I know what they are?” he asked.

I hesitated, then sighed, if I was already trusting him with all of this Mask stuff there was no reason not to go all the way with it. Though it would reveal a lot more about my life than I was comfortable with. “I have **Thug**, **Servant**, and **Student** available.”

His eyes widened. “Blights, you have **Student**! if we had done this sooner... There is no helping it now.”

“**Student** is good?” I asked.

“Yes, very much so. Most people who have the means prepare their children by giving them the foundation to have that option. And it is not often that they manage it, it requires higher learning. Many who are undecided about their Masks and manage to obtain the option start with the **Student** Mask, since it can change into anything and consolidates nicely with everything. And it is very easy to gain investment for, it requires learning. If we had done it before, all that you’ve learned so far would’ve counted as investment for it,” he shook his head. “Well, there is no use dwelling on what is lost already. You should take it. For you second Ornament though, **Thug** is a criminal variation on a warrior-type Mask, **Servant** is common but useless to you. I assume that you have some martial training?”

I appreciated him not asking questions about why I had those options. “I was trained in a few weapons,” I answered. “Not exactly like what I saw in your tent, the weapons in my world are different than what you had on display, but close. There’s no chance that you have a gun is there?”

He blinked. “I... don’t know what that is.”

I shook my head. “Most are small, can fit in your hand, they fire small fast-moving projectiles.”

He frowned. “A boomstick perhaps, the dwarves use them oftentimes.”

I was surprised that he knew what it was, or that there were guns in this world. From the state of his camp, I had made assumptions. But I already knew that I shouldn’t have. I had realized how foolish I was when I learned how old their civilization was. I heard about magic and jumped to conclusions. I made a mental note to myself to ask more about the way things worked in this world, when we had the time.

“Sadly,” he continued. “I do not have any here, I do have something similar. Go to my tent and bring me the crate that is next to the weapons rack.”

I did as he asked and found a small wooden crate that I had missed the first time. I carried it over to him and he opened it to reveal two smaller crates and two strange contraptions. He pulled one out and pressed a button which made it snap open. It took me a few moments to realize that it was a small crossbow of some kind. At least that is what I thought it was, it had an arc and a string, but I saw no handle. He turned it over then mounted it on his forearm.

“Bolt launcher, there is ammo in those smaller crates,” he gestured.

I picked up the second one and turned it over a bit before mounting it on my own forearm. It was small, and it could be folded to be even easier to carry. I opened one of the small crates and saw two dozen bolts. I picked one up and felt its weight, it looked like it was all made out of the same material. I wanted to say metal, but I just didn't know, it was strangely non-reflective.

I watched as Shimi loaded a bolt into one, then noticed that it had room for three bolts. "You can fire one after another, or all three at once," he said. Then showed me the levers that rested at the base of his forearm, near the palm. He pointed his arm then, pulled one of the levers with his finger. The string snapped forward and the release was nearly silent save for the sound of the bolt flying through the air and the impact in the tree.

It was fast, even I would have a problem avoiding that if I wasn't careful.

"It will not serve for more than a tool to cause a distraction for you, as you have no skills for its use. I doubt that you will be able to kill anything here with it unless you get exceptionally lucky. But still, it is another weapon in your arsenal," he glanced at all of my equipped weapons. I tried to hide my embarrassment. There was no need to carry all of them now that I had a camp.

"What am I hunting?" I asked finally.

"First you should pick your Ornaments," Shimi said. "The act of hunting new creatures will be a learning experience, it will give you investment for your **Student** Ornament. The **Thug** and **Servant** I would ignore, I don't think that you could get the investment for them here. Thug required other people, and Servant someone to serve, and I can already see that you would not agree to be in mine."

I nodded and then settled on the ground, with a long look at him I plunged into my *soul space*. A moment later I landed in the inner room. Saia appeared there in her dragon form, standing next to me.

“Oh, this might be a good way for us to talk without being heard,” I said.

“Feedback: This Unit is equipped with direct neural communication link, current synchronization and understanding of Host biology too low for proper function. Current method requires the Host to become incapacitated.”

“You can talk in my mind?”

“Feedback: Not currently.”

I didn’t know how to feel about that.

“What is Shimi doing?” I asked instead.

“Feedback: Sensors indicate that he has not moved from his position. No additional data available.”

“You can’t see him?”

“Feedback: Host’s eyes are closed, and this Unit’s drone is deployed as a wrist unit, it has no eyes.”

Right, that made sense. I shook my head and walked over to the pillars to pick the Ornament. As I leaned down to look at the plaque, I froze. There was a new option on there.

Revelator (Esoteric)

— *To reveal the truths* —

Why? The only thing that made sense was the prophecy and the vision. *Did that mean that it was true?* Or did that not even matter? I had decided to find the truth of this world, to see if the threat was real, and if it was make sure that the Redeemer was found and the monsters stopped. A part of me felt like I was unworthy of that. I was no one, just a thug, a servant. Yet I was chosen by something, brought to this world and stumbled onto something. Perhaps Kolan Shuk was right, and fate did exist. And his plea to a *friend across time* did touch me, it was perhaps the first thing that ever touched me. It felt as if he was speaking to me personally.

But was it a good choice for me to take? That was the question. What kind of investment would it require. The tag made me think that perhaps it would be revealing the truth. I hesitated, asking Shimi for advice would create more questions that I didn't want to answer right now. I knew that eventually I would need to tell him. But it did call to me. Being someone who had never been allowed to make her own choices before, this felt like one that could be mine.

My Mask hung above the central pillar, new etchings apparent over the horns. It had evolved again with my Carvings. I took a deep breath, then turned back to the other pillar.

I touched the word etched in the plaque and my Mask changed. I saw what could only be described as an ornament, appear on it. A dark green addition to the right lower horn, like a earring stuck into its side.

I didn't feel any different, but the plaque beneath the Mask changed too, now listing the name of the Ornament as well. I turned to the other pillar, and picked the **Student** Ornament too. Another addition manifested on the Mask, a mirror of the first one, this one orange in color. Again, the plaque expanded.

Mask of the Drainer — No Investment; 6th Carvings

Ornament of the Revelator — No Investment; No Carvings

Ornament of the Student — No Investment; No Carvings

I pulled myself away from the Mask and walked over to the shelf. I picked up the [Lesser Strength] and walked over to the back wall. Now there were two different pedestals, as I have gained a new skill slot. I placed it in and felt the skill spread through me as it activated. My body changed, my muscles growing slightly. Once done, I looked over at the door corridor seeing the new rooms. I knew that I shouldn't try and enter either one, those beasts were beyond me still.

With one last look I pulled myself out of the soul space.