

## The Ruin

I woke up slowly, my face against something cold and rough. I moved my arms, feeling like I was just hit by a truck. I was in pain, my neck still burned, my leg and the right side of my chest ached. There was something inside my chest that reminded me of the insane events of the day before. A Mask and a room that looked much like it was plucked out of my sire's home.

Slowly, I moved, putting my hands beneath me, and pushing up. After a moment of my hands shaking from the effort, I barely moved a handspan off the ground, and then I collapsed, hitting the rough earth with my nose. That wasn't good. I was weak, could barely push up my own weight. That wasn't right, even with my injuries I shouldn't be feeling like this. I took a deep breath, and then pushed again. This time I managed to half drag myself up to my knees. I almost felt... winded? *What is going on?*

I looked around, trying to figure out where I was. Behind me was a crack in what looked like a man made wall. Beyond the crack was a short tunnel of earth, the opening through which I jumped in. The walls around me looked smooth, with no seams that I could see. They were buried, obviously, and yet I could see a lot better than I usually could in the dark.

It all seemed a bit brighter for some reason. All vampires can see in the dark, but this was almost like... I turned my head up and felt horror grip my heart. There was light coming through a small crack in the ceiling—***the light was touching me!*** I screamed and scrambled to the side, crawling, trying to get away, searching for a deep enough darkness to hide myself in, knowing that it wouldn't matter. I was going to burn up in a moment, turn to ash and dust. Death didn't come, I stared at the light

with wide eyes, surprised and terrified of it. Slowly, I walked up to it, waiting to see if I would burn.

Gently, I put my hand through the ray of light, feeling the warmth of the sun for the first time in five years, but no burning. It was real, and not a dream, it seemed. This place was different, or coming here had changed me. I shuffled around and ended up sitting on the cold stone floor, looking up at a few cracks in the ceiling that were letting in the light. I felt out of breath, my body was aching, things that I hadn't felt in years were now assaulting me. I was tired in a way that a vampire rarely felt. The sun didn't burn me, but I could tell that it weakened me. I was like a human now, weaker even.

Sobs threatened to heave out of my chest as my eyes teared up. Strong emotions, an overwhelming amount of them. As a vampire I felt deeply. Much of my early training was in learning how to control my emotions. Now, I felt weak and powerless. I looked down at my hands, they were shaking. My breath hitched in my chest, and tears welled up in my eyes. My wounds hurt more. I didn't understand anything that had happened, and still there was a part of my mind that thought that this might just be a dream, or some type of afterlife—hell maybe. Light not hurting me, but making me weaker? I took a deep shuddering breath, trying to compose myself, putting my thoughts in order.

There were stories about very old vampires being able to be awake during the day, that some could even survive in direct sunlight. I knew as much as humans did, and they tended to have some wild stories. It had not even been a century since the vampires revealed themselves during the Great War, when they put themselves on the side of the Allied Powers. The humans investigated, the vampire genetics had been tested, figured out.

The original vampires were humans who ingested a rare bacterium which overtook the human bacterial flora and then started to change

their host. The changes were genetic, and they turned them into a completely different species. The bacteria spread through all of their bodies, far more intrusive than the bacteria humans lived with. A symbiotic relationship that served both sides. The bacteria lived everywhere, even in their blood, it took over the functions of what human blood cells usually did, and the bacteria facilitated all of their functions. That was why vampires were vulnerable to the sun, the UV radiation literally ignited the bacteria inside their veins. They burned from inside out. The bacteria were also highly allergic to silver, which made vampires allergic too.

So, I glanced back to the ray of light. It didn't burn me, that meant that it had no, or very little UV radiation. I knew that this wasn't Earth, two moons were kind of a giveaway. That meant that the sun that was now in the sky wasn't like the Earth's sun. All stars had UV radiation, but this place was weird. That Mask stuff felt almost magical to me. By magical, I obviously meant something beyond what I could comprehend. There was no magic on Earth that I knew about. And the way I froze when that beast roared was strange too. One thing was for certain, the light didn't hurt me anymore, but it did weaken me. That was a blessing, in a way. If it had the same effect as the Earth's sun, I would be dead right now.

The effects that I was feeling though, they were interesting. I lost my strength, my speed, my improved senses, even my regeneration. But my pain tolerance remained, though slightly weakened as well. I didn't feel the thirst, which... could make sense. Many old vampires spoke of the thirst as a companion, the devil inside of them. I had taken a few classes on the study of the thirst while at college. The scientists argued that the thirst was the collective microbial intelligence of the bacteria inside of vampires. A neural network, pushing the vampires to provide it with sustenance, with blood.

Right now, I could only assume that the bacteria were somehow suppressed, or perhaps the better word would be asleep. Something

about the sun above this world had that effect on me. Something that didn't care about walls since I was obviously in the shade right now. A radiation that spread through the solid matter? I didn't know, and ultimately it wasn't that important.

I turned and looked around, I was in a room of some kind, and it was large, I couldn't even see the end across from where had I jumped in. Above me there were two small holes, perhaps large enough for a small critter to pass through, and they let light in which allowed me to see, though not well. I walked around the room, keeping close to the light source of course. I stepped over and put my hand on the wall. It was rough to touch, yet somehow it seemed deliberate, the rough surface was even, the same everywhere I touched. There were no seams that I could find, and a small attempt at scratching the wall nearly chipped my nail. Whatever the wall was made of was very tough. I was obviously someplace that was built by design, nature didn't create rectangular rooms with perfect angles. There was debris in the room, pieces of the ceiling had fallen, and there was moss like growths on some of the walls.

There wasn't much of interest to see, which would mean that I would need to go deeper into the ruin. And sadly I couldn't see that well in the dark at the moment. The sun was setting though, I could feel it. That meant that I had been unconscious for a long time, sleeping for hours. My body didn't feel rested, vampires didn't sleep like how humans did, we fell into a kind of stasis. The older the vampire, the less time the stasis required. Their bodies were tuned to enter this rest during the day, but she knew that some older vampires could stay awake during the day. Right now... I seemed like I still needed to rest, but I could also be awake during the day. Perhaps since this sun wasn't lethal my body adapted? Or maybe since my body was weakened in this state it didn't require as long of a rest. I didn't know, and ultimately it didn't matter at the moment beyond my own curiosity. I walked back to the place I landed and picked up my makeshift glaive. I cursed myself silently as I realized that I had been walking around without it.

“*Orokana, Marianna,*” I told myself, trying to mimic the soft-spoken tone of my sire. *Reckless.* He taught me better than this.

I had an angry beast outside of this small safe place I had found, this place was filled with danger and I had to figure out how to survive. I folded my legs beneath me, put my hands on my knees in a meditative stance that my sire taught me, then I closed my eyes. I took deep breaths, trying to push everything outside of my head. The pain fell away easily enough, but the sensation in my chest remained, a sense of something being inside of me. I didn’t want to play around with it, or somehow drag myself in there again without finding a safe space to experiment first. I didn’t know how time passed while I was inside that place, and I couldn’t risk leaving my real body defenseless.

For the first time since I’ve arrived here, I found time to just think. I had spent my entire life in service to others, even before I was turned. And yet I ended up here, like this.

This was an opportunity, I realized. For the first time in a long time I smiled, feeling elated. I was free of the Master, free of the cartel. Thrown into the wilderness filled with danger, yet I didn’t care. There were no orders to follow, no one to serve. I was truly free.

Then the earth started to shake again, and all semblance of calm fled from me. I stood up quickly and dodged to the side as earth from the ceiling fell in small chunks. Before I knew it, the quake subsided, but I remained alert, looking up to see if this place would fall down on me or not.

After a few minutes, I was satisfied that it wouldn’t collapse, and I started to make plans. First, how to survive.

I was a hunter, and right now I was the one being hunted. I had to learn the lay of the land and figure out my next steps. I could hope that

the animal outside would leave, but from what I remembered it was most definitely the same species as the cub I killed, probably its mother. Something told me that it would be waiting for me, planning to ambush me the moment I left this place.

I had to find another exit. I glanced at the other side of the room. I could make out an opening, a dark corridor leading out of the giant room, but I decided not to head that way just yet. I could feel the sun above me, and I knew that it would set soon. Night would bring with it my real strength, and I needed it to survive this place.

I settled in to wait for the sun to set. I killed time by making sure that my weapon was in the best shape it could be, tying up the vines tighter and testing the claws to see if they were firmly in place. I tried to focus on the sun and my body as it set behind the world, trying to see if the change in my body was immediate or if there was a delay. The moment I felt the sun set, my strength started to return. Of course, I wasn't really sensing the sun, I was sensing the radiation that spread across the world, same with Earth's sun. If the source of it moved behind the world, the amount of it around me had to lessen if not disappear completely. I shook my head and turned my thoughts to my plan.

I felt an itchy sensation on my wounds which told me that my healing kicked in again, though I knew that the wound around my neck would take longer to heal than the other two.

I looked around the room with eyes that could see in the dark. It was a lot larger than I thought, it stretched for a hundred meters at least. I could see a corridor at the end more clearly now, and I made my way over there. I didn't feel the **thirst**, even with having to heal such wounds. The animal's blood was a lot more potent than I thought it would be. If I had drank from an animal on Earth and then healed wounds like mine, I would've been starving by now. Another curiosity.

I was still limping though, which just went to show how bad the wound on my leg was.

As I made my way to the end of the corridor, something caught my attention. A new source of light appeared and I turned, my weapon held firmly in my hands. In the corner of the room, I saw a coin sized orb, casting a pale light on the room. It pulsed, and then rapidly grew until it was as tall as I was, hanging there suspended in the air.

I felt a pulse come from it. I could hear a faint buzzing and felt almost a pull coming from it. I could feel it inside of my chest. It was more like a crack made out of light, just hovering there in space. It hadn't been there before.

I was drawn to it, even my thirst seemed enthralled by it. Before I knew what was happening, I was standing in front of it. My hand rose unbidden, reaching for it as the light pulsed.

I blinked, and somehow managed to get a hold of myself. Realizing how stupid I was, I started to pull my hand back. And then the crack pulsed with more light, it opened up filling my view like a giant rift in space, filled with swirling light. The next thing I knew, it pulled me in, and light exploded around me. I was falling, screaming, and the light all around me pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat.