

Carving

The black blood flowed down my throat. It tasted like sweet wine, just like the blood of the animal in the jungle. Memories of the monkey started to flow into my head.

The hunter group was gathering food from the crevices around the river. The light coming down from the light bugs was enough to let the small snails and worms be seen in the dark. The hunter group was lucky, they hadn't met with any of the tall ones, with their sticks that broke bones or loud breaking of stone, digging deeper. And they had found enough food to feed the entire family. They turned away from the river and made their way back through the small side tunnels when everything started to shake. Suddenly, light filled the world, so much of it that it hurt the hunter's eyes. He looked above and saw no ceiling of stone, but an expanse filled with gray mist. A moment after it shifted and they were now in an endless cavern filled with light and bugs so far away that they were just small dots above. All was washed with color. Dirt covered everything. They were confused, but the hunter master organized them, they started to explore. When the pillar of light appeared in the sky, they decided to head in that direction.

They reached the top of the hill, and promptly retreated from the sleeping form of a big predator. It smelled of death, and it was an unknown. The group headed down the hill. Then, they noticed one of the tall ones, the tallest that they had ever seen. Quickly, they realized that their luck was great. The tall one was alone, and it had no great metal stick to break stone or bones with. It could be overcome, a tall one could feed the family for a long time.

They followed the hunter master and prepared an ambush.

I pulled back from the memories as I felt the life drain from the creature. The blood didn't feel nearly as powerful as what I had tasted in the jungle, but it was still useful. I felt my body healing faster because of it. I continued drinking, taking my fill. Once I was done with it, I moved to the next dead body, then started drinking that one too. The thirst abated slowly, and I started to feel better. From the memories I got from them, I could piece a few things. The light that they saw was exactly as what had happened to me when I was transported. These creatures had been taken as well; they had found themselves here probably around the same time I had. I didn't know what that meant, but they hadn't been anywhere around jungle when I was thrown there.

After I felt like I had my fill I stood up, immediately getting a sensation inside of me.

Mask of the Drainer — No Investment; Second Carving

[Empty Slot] skill gained.

I froze, it wasn't words exactly, more like knowledge spilling into my head. *I got a skill? [Empty Slot].* I had no idea what to do with it. What it even was. I focused back on the real world, taking stock of myself and looking at my wounds. The holes had closed, and I could feel the heat spreading beneath the skin as I healed further. I limped back to where Saia was still standing on the corpse of one of the creatures.

“Statement: This unit is impressed by the host’s physical capabilities. Ke Erzi would need treatment in order to survive wounds such as what the host suffered. Query: This unit has detected an increase in Source Weave amounts within the host after each kill and the following drinking of the creatures blood. Does the host species gather Source Weave through blood?”

I tilted my head at Saia. “My race survives on blood as a source of sustenance. There was no Source on my world. What you are detecting is something new. I think it has to do with Masks.”

It tilted its head in imitation of myself. “Query: More data requested.”

I sighed, I was as much in the dark as she was. I wondered if we had the time to try and figure it out. What I had seen in the memories of the creatures I had bigger worries. There was a creature on top of that hill, a massive one. But aside from that... I was pretty sure that I saw the same type of light and a crack in space as the one that had brought me here. That could be my way out. I walked around, picking up my weapons and tucking them behind my belt.

“I think that I need to experiment,” I said to Saia. “I need to do something, to meditate. Can you keep watch over me?”

I didn’t know if Saia could wake me up if I went into that place, but she had proven that she could be brutal.

“Feedback: Affirmative, guarding the host is one of this unit’s primary directives. Query: Permission to assimilate biomass?”

I frowned. “Didn’t I say that you can’t eat me?”

“Clarification: This unit is referring to the biomass of the deceased creatures.”

“That can help you?”

“Feedback: It will allow this unit to harvest power and rebuild Structural Mass.”

“And make you grow in size?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

I looked at the tiny dragon, wondering if I should allow it. On the one hand, she was an alien piece of tech that was terrifying all on its own. On the other... well, she had just fought with me, and it didn't seem like she could actively do anything against me. “How much would you need to get back to your full size?”

“Feedback: Unknown, most of the Structural Mass relies on Source Weave as a power source. Currently, only power received from the host can sustain Structural Mass. This unit's estimation is that the host body can provide power for only a 5% increase of Structural Mass without impairing the host's operational capacity and increasing the fuel requirements to detrimental levels.”

Having Saia bonded to me had already increased my blood requirement by 200%, if what it had said previously was correct. That wasn't ideal, but I could live with that. Any more and it could turn dangerous.

“As long as you don't take more from me,” I told her.

Her beady eyes blinked. “Statement: This unit's calculations have changed.”

I knelt next to it. “What calculations and changed how?”

“Feedback: The amount of power available to the Host has increased by 5.8%. I am detecting Source Weave threads spread throughout the host’s body.”

The Carving, I realized immediately. I was improving, somehow. “Carving,” I said to her. “We’ll talk about it later, assimilate what you can and quickly. I need to meditate and then we will see about leaving this place.”

Saia obliged by turning into a silver puddle with hexagonal shapes all over its surface. Saia then dropped on top of the dead creature’s head. I then watched in fascination as the silver goo that rapidly started to shrink until the head disappeared. Black vapor vented through the surface of the goo. Then she started eating the rest of the body, and then the next body. I was watching in fascination as the bodies were disappearing, yet the silver puddle didn’t seem to be growing. Then, after the third body the goo flowed back and reshaped itself into a tiny dragon.

“Statement: Assimilation complete.”

“You don’t seem... larger at all?”

“Feedback: This Unit’s Structural Mass has increased by 5%, repair of the Autonomous Platform [Sensory Engram] finished. The quality and the amount of Source Weave infused mass was low. Had to re-purpose a greater amount than anticipated. The conversion rate is likewise low by design. The Creators wished to avoid a second Biosource Autonomous Self-replicating Swarm incident.”

I didn’t even pretend to understand what she meant, but I did lean down and study her form. She was a tiny bit bigger.

“What does the [Sensory Engram] do?” I could infer, but it would be better if she clarified.

“Provides the basic sensory input to the Autonomous Platform, currently only the auditory, visual, and the basic Source Weave components of the Engram are operational. No apparent cause as to why the rest are not working.”

Right, she did mention that she was using my senses to perceive the world. “Okay, keep watch, I need to do something.”

Saia jumped on me as I sat against the wall and climbed to sit on top of my head. I wanted to comment on the absurdity of it all but decided that I shouldn't delay any longer. With a deep breath, I focused on my chest and tried to think about going back to that room. It didn't take more than that thought to feel myself being pulled down. I felt myself falling, the world twisted, and then I was inside the room.

I frowned as I noticed that my glaive, or rather two pieces of it were now with me. I shook my head and glanced around. Green tatami and brown-yellow walls met my eyes. The three pillars were there still and the Mask remained where it was. Something caught my eyes on it. It seemed more... ornamental? There were lines around the horns, like etchings. I frowned, was that what it meant by carvings? I shook my head as I noticed another addition. I walked around the pillars to the far wall, where now there was a small pedestal growing out of the wall, with an empty stone bowl on top of it. There was a plaque beneath it, and I leaned down to read.

[Empty Slot]

Place any skill you've acquired in this bowl to gain access to it. The power of the skill determines how long replacing it takes.

I blinked at that. It reminded me a lot of the games I used to play in college. I wondered how I could acquire skills.

Before I even finished the thought I felt the room shake. I jumped back and saw the wall on my right ripple, and an opening shape itself in the wall. I frowned, and once the shaking stopped, walked over. It was a small room, more like a part of a corridor maybe just a dozen steps deep. There was a light on the ceiling and two doors on one side of the wall. I walked in, and saw that the first door was made out of gray wood, almost like the bark of the trees in the jungle where I arrived. It also had a claw mark on it that was familiar to me. I pulled out one of my weapons, and raised it up to the door. The claw matched the mark. I frowned, then glanced at the other door.

The second door looked like it was made out of stone, marked with fangs in the center that looked exactly like the ones the monkeys had. There was nothing else of interest in the corridor. I took a deep breath, pulled my weapons out, then pushed open the door that I thought was related to the monkeys.

The inside was... not what I expected. It was a cave, dark with no source of light. Even my eyes had trouble seeing clearly, but I saw a shape in the distance, just one. Moving from rock to rock. It was the monkeys natural habitat I realized, what I had seen in its memories.

The monkey screeched as I approached, and then it charged. I waited for its leap, and once it came, I sidestepped and attacked. My two daggers lashed out, one pierced its neck, while the other stabbed into its stomach. Killing it quickly and cleanly. A single monkey was no threat at all.

The body turned into particles of light, making me jump back in surprise. Then, a few seconds later the light coalesced into a sphere, that somehow hardened and took on a glassy look. It floated in the air above where the monkey's body used to be. Slowly, I reached out and picked it up. Nothing happened, and I frowned. I turned around and saw the door I came in behind me. This place seemed like it stretched far in the distance, but I didn't try to explore it, I didn't know anything about it.

I walked back into the corridor and closed the door, then headed into the main room. The moment I stepped in the walls rippled, and shelves appeared all over three of them, each holding a bowl that looked a bit simpler than that on the pedestal on the far wall.

I tilted my head, then glanced at the orb in my hands, it was pale in color, almost gray. On instinct, I walked to the new shelves and put the orb in one of them. The orb floated in the center of it, and immediately a plaque appeared beneath the bowl.

[Lesser Leap]

A quick and improved leap.

Huh, I glanced at the pedestal, an idea of how all this worked forming inside of my head. I turned back and looked at the corridor again. If I was

right, then... I walked to the other door, the one with the claw mark. I shook my body, loosening up and pushed it open. On the other side was a lush jungle, an exact copy of the place where we fought before. I saw the animal sitting on a large root at the base of a tree. As soon as I stepped in it stirred, then roared.

I kept my eyes focused on the animal in front of me. It jumped down from the root as I got closer, and then we started walking around each other. I made the first move. I knew how fast it could be, so I tried to surprise it. I stabbed with one of my daggers, and it jumped out of the way. I whirled and brought the other one on it, catching it on the shoulder. I opened a deep cut with its own claw, then I jumped back as it tried to retaliate.

I was weaker the last time I fought it, recovering from the silver and disoriented, and I only had my nails. This time, I had weapons, and I was very good with them. It came at me, and I stabbed. It slid out of the way and attempted to snap its teeth on my forward arm. I pulled back and kicked it in the other shoulder, making it stumble. Then I whirled, raising both hands above my head and brought them down from above, cutting open its side. It whined, but I didn't relent. It tried to swipe at me, but I ducked and rolled away beneath its leg, then I brought a hand up as I stood. I caught its lower neck, and split it open, blood gushed out drenching me in it.

The animal fell to the ground, twitching and thrashing. I watched with apt attention as it stilled. A few moments later it turned into particles of light, leaving behind a small glowing brown orb floating where its body used to be. I picked up the orb and looked at it. It was glowing with brown light, and inside I could see particles swirling around.

I walked back into the main room and put it on the shelf, next to the other one.

[Lesser Strength]

Grants you a passive increase in strength.

I looked from one to the other. If what I read on the [Empty Slot] was right, then there was a cooldown between replacing them. I had to make the right choice the first time. I was a vampire, so I didn't feel like I needed either one. I could leap far already, and I was strong. But this was magic, and I did want to experience it. If I had to choose between the two, I would double down on strength every time.

I picked up the brown orb and carried it over to the pedestal. I deposited it and the bowl flashed, then turned brown. The golden plaque beneath turned dim, and another appeared with the [Lesser Strength] skill description. Then I felt something go through me like lightning, touching my entire body. I shivered, and then looked down at my body. I was still wearing the same thing that I came here in, my combat fatigues, tank top and a vest. I pulled my shirt, and looked at my stomach.

When I was turned, my body underwent changes. I lost some organs, others transformed, and my muscles became stronger. I was leaner, and heavier, but I wasn't really muscled. I had some definition. Now, I could see my abs clearly. My muscles had gotten even more defined, maybe even slightly bigger.

It hit me then. I had magic, and I could already tell that I was going to love it.