

## The Soul Space

"Wait here," I said to Felix as I gathered the bodies and started to drag them away. I couldn't leave the kid alone for long, but I really didn't want him to see what I was about to do.

"Are you going to eat them?" He asked slowly, his eyes following the bodies.

I rolled my eyes. "Vampires don't eat people," I answered, then after a beat I added. "We drink them."

His hand raised to his neck, his eyes wide, and I grimaced. "Sorry, that was a bad joke."

He gave me a shaky smile and I turned away, pulling the bodies behind a large tree, where he wouldn't be able to see. Then, I took a few sips from the other two corpses, taking their essence and investment for myself. I didn't get a Carving, but I didn't expect it. These people probably had only a handful of Carvings at best, nothing compared to the Investment levels of blood that I drank on Ish Vimza.

I wondered how getting their skills would go, but that was a question for another time. I wished that I could drain their blood, but I already had enough in my backpack, and I didn't want to traumatize the kid any more than he probably already was. Draining blood from human bodies could get messy.

I looked down on the corpses, and realized just what a waste their deaths had been. I reacted without thinking, again. Emotions were tools, but I was the one that was supposed to guide them down the path

of my own choosing. Using anger part of the Heart of Azure and Scarlet I had little issues with. It was my own personal failing that was my problem. When things happened to me, I was rarely able to stop myself from reacting based on my upbringing. Growing up in the cartel where hesitation meant death or worse, I had learned to strike back ten times stronger after any slight or insult.

I didn't need to kill them, that was the old Marianna, not someone who had her eyes set on saving the world. I was strong enough that I could've disabled them, gotten more information from them. Instead, all I got were snippets of memories. I didn't have issues with killing, I never had, I knew what I was and I accepted it. A vampire couldn't survive without blood, that killed any squeamish human part of me that had survived the transition. But the greatest Vampires were not the butchers that humanity fears. The impalers, the conquerors, the ones whose names were drenched in blood. No, the greatest of her kind were those whose names were never known, those who pulled the strings from the shadows. They were the ones that I had to emulate.

I looked back at the three dead men. They weren't good people, that much of I was certain. They were threatening a kid, and they tried to kill me, but... Perhaps it didn't need to end this way.

"You want to consume them, Saia?" I asked after a while. "I'd really like not to leave much evidence of this... incident."

Saia tilted her head. "Feedback: Affirmative, more biomass will aid me in engram production and experiments."

I knelt and rummaged through their pockets, taking everything I thought was valuable.

"Well, they are all yours," I said, and the dragon landed on one of the bodies and turned into goo, starting the process.

A while later, I returned to where Felix was nervously waiting with a bundle of gear under my arm. Saia had consumed all of their biomass, leaving things that I could use.

"You said that you don't eat people," Felix looked at the stuff in my hands with his eyes open wide.

"I don't," I said, then pointed at Saia. "But she does."

He looked up at the tiny dragon with an expression of absolute horror and broken dreams.

"Clarification: This unit does not *"eat"* people, rather this unit can consume biomass."

Felix opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, seemingly at a loss for words.

I rummaged through the gear that I found, taking a closer look at the most interesting items. The first was a compass, that seemingly worked. There was a plastic lighter with half the butane still in it. The serrated steel wheel was slightly corroded, but it wasn't as bad as other metal items I had seen. With a few spins, I confirmed that it still worked. I could only assume that the type of alloy, or rather the percentages of certain metals in it was what impacted the alloy the most. One of the ingredients had to be extremely vulnerable to the Source. The last item was a bundle of rope. I gathered all of them and stored them in my backpack, then turned my attention to the weapons.

I wrapped up the sword in a shirt, then pushed it in between my back and the pack on my shoulders, sliding it in through the straps to more easily carry it.

I would've taken the staff too, but I already had to carry my spear. So I just put against the ground, then slowly pushed it straight down, as if I was planting a beam. It took a bit effort, as it was still daylight, but the staff quickly dropped all the way down, and I covered the top with dirt.

Felix looked at me with an awed expression on his face that I ignored. I recovered Shadow's knife from where he had dropped it, and offered him the one that the raiders had.

There was still signs of a struggle around me, the blood in the dirt, but at least it would be harder for anyone to tell what happened now, with no bodies to be found.

The sun was slowly setting, and I decided that the best course of action was to make camp again before heading for the church.

We walked back to where our original camp was in silence. Felix kept throwing glances at me and Saia when he thought that we couldn't see. I expected it, it was why I had tried to conceal my eyes and mouth. Humans had a variety of reactions to vampires, from outright fear, to disgust, or indifference. Where and how you were raised usually decided on what you would feel. People living in first world countries, in the big cities where everything moved so fast, often didn't care that much. Vampires didn't change their day to day life, they lived amongst the civilized, and vampires adapted to fit in. You would see vampires on the covers of magazines, giving interviews, leading companies.

We were very good at fitting in and making ourselves look as harmless as possible.

Then there were those who were more religious in their beliefs, who believed that all of us should be burned at the stake. Thankfully, those voices had died out in the last few decades, the years following the Great

War had done a lot to change the image of the vampires in the people's eyes.

But then there were those who lived in backwater areas forgotten by society. In the mountain villages where someone disappearing in the night are just a fact of life. Places where vampires could take control just with the power of who they were. Like how the Master of the Cartel had. Those people knew the danger a vampire represented well.

We found our old campsite just before the sun moved beyond the horizon.

"Saia, field please," I said and the faint shimmer of a protective field appeared around us.

"You said that it was your skill," Felix said, looking at Saia.

"I said that it was a skill," I told him. "Never said that it was mine."

Felix opened his mouth, then thought better of it. I smiled inwardly and then set him to make us a fire again.

"Can I have the lighter?" He asked.

"You need to practice, the more you become familiar with fire, the more likely you are to get a Mask evolution related to that. If that is what you want of course," I said.

That made him throw himself at the task, while I sat down and leaned my back against a tree. I felt tired, the fight was short, but it was intense, I had expended a lot of my energy, especially since it was still daylight. The blood I drank was replenishing my energy reserves, I could feel it, but it was a lot slower than it would've been at night. I sat in silence as Felix gathered twigs for his pile, and the sun moved beyond

the horizon. I closed my eyes as my full faculties returned and the wound on my cheek started to close. I cracked my neck and stretched my arms, feeling my full power returning. Then, I sighed and turned my attention back to Felix as he was struggling with his knife and flint when I felt something lance through my chest and stood up suddenly.

Felix yelped and knocked over his pile of twigs, looking at me with fear in his eyes.

I remained standing, my back straight and head tilted to the side.

When I didn't move for a few seconds, Felix spoke.

"What is it?" He asked.

I barely heard him, my attention was all on what was inside. I felt my skills return, the cooldown run out. It was a strange sensation, a magnified version of what I felt when any one skill came back from its cooldown. Except that this was several skills all at once.

I shook my head, dismissing the sensation, and looked down at Felix.

"It's nothing, I thought that I heard something," I said. "And I don't see a fire."

Felix scrambled back next to his pile and started working on it again.

I sat back down again, and Saia landed on my knee.

"Statement: The long cooldown appears to be three days," she said in a low tone that a human wouldn't be able to hear.

I nodded, glancing up at the dark sky. It was around this time that I finished my fight against the kiji pack. Three days. That was a long time to be without skills, but less than I had feared.

Night had fallen, and I could tell that the kid was exhausted. He barely managed to start a fire, flint slipping from his fingers on every second strike of the knife. Once he was done, he bundled up next to it, his head on his pack.

I could tell that he was trying to stay awake, and that he was keeping his attention on me. Even though he was trying not to appear like he was.

"You should sleep," I told him and he startled. "I'm not going to hurt you. I wouldn't have saved you otherwise."

He didn't move, but I could hear his breath hitching in his throat. After a few seconds, he finally spoke.

"Really?"

"You have my promise," I said.

He shuffled around and looked at me, and I tried to convey my sincerity. He held my gaze for what felt like a few minutes, and then nodded. He turned back around and closed his eyes. I had no way of knowing if he did trust me, but a few minutes after he was asleep, so perhaps I had managed to convince him.

Once I was sure that he had entered a deep sleep I turned my attention to Saia.

"Can you keep watch? I want to check my soul space."

Saia inclined her head, and I focused on my chest, pulling myself in.

The transition was immediate, and I found myself in the familiar yet different room. There were changes, a lot of changes.

"Well, that's interesting," I said.

"Statement: Your advancement to the First Investment tier had obviously initiated these changes," Saia said. It still felt weird knowing that she could send a piece of her to this place with me, but I was getting used to it.

I turned my attention back to the room around me. The ceiling above me had risen, and a second floor had appeared with a ladder to the side leading to it. The walls and everything else seemed to be improved, the pedestals had turned from simple stone, to one that was somehow clearer. They were now a deep gray color of a thundercloud, compared to the dirty appearance they held before. The wooden planks that were on the walls were likewise improved, they looked like they were made out of higher quality wood now. I turned and climbed up the brown ladder, to the second floor. It was just a narrow walkway that hugged the wall in the ring, or rather square around the room. It was just wide enough for me to walk around though.

The walls had shelves, like those below, though these ones were obviously empty.

With nothing more to see, I climbed down and looked around. My Mask stood in its usual place, the centerpiece of the room. The two smaller pedestals that signified my Ornaments were now merged with the middle pedestal holding my Mask, but were still lower than the center. The Mask was as intimidating as ever, with only a few tiny changes. There were faint lines etched in the horns, and the jade had spread slightly around the sides of the eyes. Otherwise it remained the



same old, mostly obsidian and savage looking mask. The plaque beneath it remained the same.

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***Mask of the Blood Invoker (Physical, Weave, Esoteric):***

***1st Investment; 3rd Carving***

***Ornament of the Revelator (Weave, Esoteric):***

***No Investment; 4th Carving***

***Ornament of the Student (Physical, Weave, Esoteric):***

***No Investment; 8th Carving***

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The plaque beneath that one, that had my trait, hadn't changed either.

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**|Potential Augmentation| trait**

**Wearing the Mask of the Blood Invoker grants a significant increase to all attributes. All cooldowns are greatly reduced,**

**after the Mask is removed, all used skills are put on a long cooldown.**

**Slotting skills of the same type grants bonuses.**

**Current bonuses available:**

**Beast: Slotting in skills that all contain <beast> type increases their effectiveness and reduces cooldowns. All physical senses are heightened.**

**Movement: Slotting in skills that all contain <movement> type increases their effectiveness and reduces cooldowns. Air resistance of your body is reduced.**

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Currently, I had mostly <beast> type skills, so I only had that bonus, but I realized that I was looking forward to experimenting with the other one as well. I glanced at my slotted skills, making sure that everything was alright.

The back wall still held three main pedestals with my skills on them. Each pedestal had two bowls with skills, with one set of three being grey and inactive. I glanced at my slotted skills, making sure that everything was alright.

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**P1-Beast bonus**

[Mist Step]

[Lesser Strength]

[Debilitating Wave]

## **P2-Beast bonus**

[Sonic Screech]

[Lesser Impale]

[Quick Claw]

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To the side were my other skills, the [Swap Profile], [One Truth Verified], [A Lesson Remembered], and [Practical Learning]. There were no real changes, other than the visual improvements, like everything else in the room.

I moved into the corridor that held my doors. The doors themselves were still the same, but like with everything else, the corridor had been improved. I walked by the old doors, until I reached the new ones.

There were a lot of new additions. The bird that I hunted with Shadow in order to feed after the Sikiri fight, the snake I killed on the estate, the new additions, the raiders, Louis, Mateo, and Cristobal. And of course, the one that belonged to Shadow.

His door was the most elaborate one yet. Made of dark wood, with an elaborate image etched into its surface. The bottom was filled with swirls, that I somehow knew represented mist. Above it was a mountain with a giant tree towering over it, and on top of the door was a crown with nine prongs.

I reached for the door, and then paused. I wasn't anywhere near strong enough to fight with Shadow. I didn't even know how he would look. Animals that I had drank from seemed simpler than the originals that I had encountered in the real world. Would he be able to talk? Or would he just be a mindless automaton with his power. I didn't know if I could handle seeing him like that.

I turned away and looked at the other doors. There were several ones that were beyond me, the mature ferrorn's door, the reaper's, and sikiri's,. The ferrorn one's was the least of them, and I knew that I couldn't attempt it now. Shadow was far beyond that.

I glanced at the three newest doors, the raiders, and decided that I wanted to know what was beyond them. I glanced at Saia who had been following along in silence and gestured to her.

"What do you think I'll find inside?" I asked.

"Feedback: Impossible to know."

"Thanks," I rolled my eyes.

I took a deep breath and looked at one of the doors. It was simple, and the most familiar to me. It looked like any general door that one could find in the barrio, white wood with an ordinary brass lever handle. I hesitated for just a moment, and then pushed the door open.

The inside was the copy of the forest where I fought the three raiders, and the man stood in the center, his sword drawn and pointed at the entrance. I recognized him from the memories, Louis, the one that had cut my face.

There was no sign of recognition in his eyes, nothing but empty eyes reflecting a hollow mind. My weapon, the serpent-tongue spear rose from the floor next to me as soon as I thought about fighting him, and I picked it up before entering. The moment I stepped in the man charged; his sword raised high.

I dodged his attacks, studying him closely, trying to see if there was anything sign of the man that he used to be. I had worried that my Mask was actually trapping souls, but I saw no sign that the man was anything other than a pale copy of the real thing.

"Are you in there?" I asked after I dodged a few of his attacks, but there was no answer. Seeing that I won't get anything more than a mindless attacking puppet, I ended things.

I dodged his attack then in a burst of speed brought my spear down over his head.

The man fell apart into mist, and left behind an orb with his skill. I picked it up and carried it back to the shelves, placing it into an empty bowl.

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### **[Double Strike]**

Execute two strikes at the same time.

<physical><esoteric><martial><offense>

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It was a good skill, one that I had experienced personally. The only issue I had with slotting it was that it didn't have the <beast> tag, which meant that I wouldn't get the bonus for the profile I place it in.

I put it aside for now, letting it rest next to the other skills that I had on the shelves like [Lesser Leap], [Peck], and [Sharp Eye].

"So," I said as Saia and I headed back in the corridor. "They aren't real people."

"Statement: It would seem not."

"Can't you just, like, agree with me for once?"

"Feedback: When the data supports your statements, of course."

"And data doesn't support my statement now?" I looked at her with narrowed eyes.

"Feedback: Insufficient data."

"Right, right. You wouldn't be just playing with me, now would you?"

"Feedback: This unit was not designed to "play"."

I chuckled and turned my attention to the doors, I wanted to get the other two skills I got from the raiders. As I came near the end of the corridor, I paused, then frowned.

"Saia," I said slowly. "You didn't try to open that door, did you?"

"Feedback: I did not."

My eyes were glued to the elaborate door that belonged to Shadow, it was just a tiny bit ajar. I took a step closer, then reached my hand to touch the door.

"Well," a voice said behind me and I rounded on it, my spear ready, then I froze.

"This was not what I had expected, not at all."

Shadow stood there, the same as he had been the last time I saw him. He was looking at his own hand, studying it as if he was seeing it for the first time.

"Uh," I started, unable to even form words.

Shadow blinked, then raised his eyes to meet mine. "Hello, little Star."