

Task

I had not yet recovered from the vision. Even now, a part of me wanted to revolt against the idea that anything like that was possible. That it all had to be a trick, a lie. The anguish I experienced was etched into my mind, a film playing on a loop that I didn't wholly understand. Yet now, I tried to think about it clearly. The only evidence of this vision being true was a word of a being that had been dead for thousands of years.

A part of me that grew up with the utmost respect of the dead rebelled. The part that reminded me of walks down the streets on the *Día de los Santos Difuntos*, following my sire as he took that one day in the year to see the lives of mortals, that part chastised me for even thinking that the dead would lie. I had to remind myself that there was too much that I didn't know. So, I cataloged what I did know.

I was transported to another world. That much was undeniably true. I had magic. I found the ruins, which meant that someone used to live here, and after an earthquake I found a sealed room which held the message in the bottle. Its creator was dead before me, his bones half turned to dust. There was no reason to make such a message if it was not true. For what? A kind of a cosmic joke that no one would find? No, aside from the fact that I did feel like the being spoke the truth, I also remembered what the vision felt like. Now, there could be some magical reason for it, perhaps it messed with my mind and made me believe that it was true. But again, for what purpose? If the message was real, then the people that the being belonged to were no longer living, and I was of no consequence to them.

I glanced at Saia, she had tried to activate the crystal too but it didn't seem to work for her. The most she could tell me was that she didn't feel any remnants or influences on my mind, though that didn't mean that

there weren't any. Still, it made me feel better. I decided that the most prudent course of action was to proceed with the belief that all that I had seen was true. The risk of me ignoring it and being wrong was too great. I didn't know any time-frame for when what I saw would occur, but I knew that I did not want to stand idle.

The two murals in the temple area were making more sense now. On one side was the host of the monsters, on the other was the flaming figure standing against them. Were those his people, fighting against the monsters? The red haze that filled everything around the monsters and the maelstrom in the distance from which they came, the one that looked suspiciously like the curtain of clouds I had seen in the distance when I just arrived on this world. Was the threat already here on this world? Was the warning too late? I didn't know, nor did I know what it all meant. I could see how one could spend a long time trying to decipher what the vision showed, especially if they hadn't seen the monsters themselves. And I was certainly not equipped for that. What was obvious to me was that something out there was terrible, and every fiber in my being revolted at the thought of it even existing.

I was never really religious, even when surrounded by religious people. Going to church and saying a prayer? Of course, I lived in a small community, faith was important. Customs were important, some were so deeply in me that they were forever part of who I was. Still, for me religion was always just a thing that one did, more out of habit than true belief. Being sold to a cartel as a kid did have the unfortunate side effect of making one not believe in a benevolent God. It wasn't until I meet Khalil in the States that I truly understood what faith was. I saw how it could be a beautiful thing, how it could center a person. I never let myself be open to it, but I did admire it from afar.

Now, in this moment, I felt more drawn to such belief. What I saw was anathema to all that I knew. It was horrible in the full meaning of that word, the primal idea behind it. Just thinking about what the vision

showed me, the cruelty and pain, it instilled horror deep inside of me that I couldn't shake.

I knew that I would do anything to stop it, that I would rather burn than let that those things be free to cause that terrible pain. I was the one that had heard the call. Whether fate or chance, I would do my part. I didn't know how or where I could even start, but it called to me. I was not a good person, I had spent my life doing things that had made me know that if God existed I would never stand in his grace. This felt like an opportunity. Like a hand reaching out, offering redemption.

If the vision was true, this world was in danger. I didn't know if it had people living in it, but I would find out. If they were here, I had to find them. Outside was a jungle, and I knew that jungles had rivers.

So, first things first, get out of here and find a river. Avoid beasts that wanted to eat my face while doing so. Then follow the river downstream as it was the most likely direction to find a settlement. My eyes were drawn to the mural on the wall, the image of the glowing person high above the armies, shining with light. A champion standing against the monsters. The image inspired hope in my heart.

I took one last look around the area, but found nothing that had survived the age this place had been through. I pulled out one of the two pouches I found and emptied one into my ammo pouch, then I grabbed the crystal and put it inside, tying it around my belt for transport.

With that I climbed out of the room through the crack and back into the ruins. Slowly, I made my way to the corridor then started my way back to the room where I entered. In the distance I could hear the rain falling outside of the ruin. I hoped that by now the big beast that chased me here would be gone. As I reached the room, suddenly felt something pass through me like electricity. I stumbled and Saia spoke.

“Statement: Source Weave echo detected.”

As quickly as the sensation came, it was gone, and I knew what it was. The skill had activated, I even knew how to use it. It was an unnerving feeling, like I had an extra muscle that I had always had and knew how to move.

“The skill just activated. It’s been what, half a day?” I told her. Judging by the fact that I didn’t feel like the sun was close to coming out. At least 6 hours. That seemed like a long time just to change a skill. “Think that we should test it out?” I asked her.

“Feedback: Knowing the limits of engrams is a prerequisite to optimal utilization.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Feedback:...yes.”

“And you couldn’t have just said so?” I glanced at the wrist brace.

She didn’t respond. I hoped that I hadn’t hurt her feelings.

“Can we use it on your drone form? It doesn’t hurt you right?” I asked.

“Feedback: The Autonomous Platform is a remote operated part of this Unit. Damage to its structure does not negatively impact this Unit’s operations.”

I chuckled. It almost felt like she was doing it on purpose.

“Okay, then.”

Saia shifted into a hand sized dragon and stood on the ground in front of me. I took a deep breath, rolled my shoulders and then reached down to my skill.

On instinct, I activated it for the first time.

[Debilitating Wave]

It rippled out of me, a wave of barely perceivable red energy that expanded in a perfect sphere, growing weaker and fainter as it went further away. It hit Saia next to me and then fizzled out around a meter and a half, two at most, from me.

Saia remained standing, then tilted her head.

“Statement: This Unit detected no interference with the Autonomous Platform.”

I frowned. “Maybe because you are bonded to me? Can the skill tell somehow?”

“Feedback: That conclusion is plausible given the information we currently possess.”

I tsked. “Well, that was a waste, and now I can’t use it again,” somehow I knew that it was unavailable to be used. What I couldn’t tell was how long it the skill was going to be on this cooldown, though something told me that it would become available again. It was like I had an internal sense about it.

“Damn,” I started. “I know that I had to see how it worked, I think that we should wait until it becomes available again before going out.”

“Statement: Having more tools would be preferable.”

We continued walking back to the old room, and once there we sat down near the entrance and waited.

“You know,” I started as the silence stretched. “It might be smarter to head out during the day.”

Saia looked up at me from my lap. “Query: Based on what parameters?”

“Well, both of the beasts I encountered that wanted to eat me was at night. From the way that the first one stalked me and seemingly had no issue seeing in the dark, I assume that it was nocturnal. Heading out during the day might be safer.”

“Feedback: This Unit concurs with that conclusion.”

“Thanks for the support Saia,” I smiled at the dragon. She was just so cute, even though she was terrifying at the same time. I was yet to quite let myself think on what she and her bond to me truly represented. It was easier to ignore it for not. She was obviously not a threat, at least not for now. And I had faith in the **thirst** and its ability to fight off any kind of attempts at a takeover. If Saia was to be believed it had already done so once.

Then, a while later, the skill became available again. I sat up straight, it was a weird feeling.

“About an hour then,” I said. “That explains why the bear beast didn’t use it more than once.”

“Statement: Foresight in the use of the engram should be exercised.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Yeah, yeah.”

We waited for the dawn. I felt it coming, and focused on the sensation. It was not something that I had often felt on Earth. The arrival of the sun on Earth was the herald of a dreamless slumber. It was a terrifying thing to me back then. There was no resisting its arrival, I was too young to be able to remain awake during the day. I had waited for the sun with trepidation and even fear. No longer.

The sun rose over the world and the rain passed. I felt my body grow weaker. I sighed and stood up, slowly trying to get accustomed to the new state my body found itself in. It was almost like I was human again, though I wasn't sure just how I would measure up at the moment. Perhaps I was weaker, or maybe slightly stronger, it didn't matter in the end.

I checked all my gear one last time, making sure that the vine tying up the glaive to my back was secure, that my belt was tight and the two makeshift daggers properly secured on my lower back. I checked my knife, pulling it out of its sheath the sliding it back in, I went to click the safety strap but then remembered that this one didn't have it. Saia was back on my arm as a wrist brace, we didn't want to draw more attention, and a silver flying dragon was very attention drawing. I went over my other items, and with everything in its place I set out, squeezing through the narrow crack and out into the jungle. The smell of the passing rain filled my nostrils. Familiar, and yet new. There were scents here that I had never known on Earth.

The ground shook, another earthquake. I got low and waited it out as the trees shook and noise rose. Again, as before, the quake was short lived. They really seem to be common in this place. I waited for a bit, listening and watching for any danger. Having lessened senses was a big problem,

but it wasn't as if human-like senses were helpless. My eyes still saw very well, especially during the day.

The jungle looked just as terrifying during the day as it did at night. It was obviously old, untouched by any hands. The trees were so tall that they created almost a temple like atmosphere beneath their branches. As if they were a ceiling holding up the sky. Light passed through the leaves fragmented, keeping everything beneath in the shadow. Vines were everywhere, and purple, blue, and green was the most dominant color of the plants. Some looked like mushrooms, though looking more like cinnamon sticks growing out of the ground. Others were big lotus like leaves that were rolled into long tubes, some sagging toward the ground from the weight, others leaning on vines.

It was a strange, colorful, and ominous jungle.

I looked around for a few more minutes, making sure that it was safe. Seeing and hearing no sign of danger I decided that it was time. I picked a direction that seemed like it was going downhill and started walking, hoping that I would eventually encounter a river. I didn't make more than a dozen steps before heard it.

I glanced back and saw a massive beast jump from the top of a small hill. The ruin was covered with earth, buried. The beast looked much like its cub, blue skin with black stripes. Large yellow eyes and an elongated snout, a long neck and massive claws. It also had something that looked very much like bone growing out of its head, covering its face almost like a skull mask. The white bones grew over the rest of its body too, almost like it was some kind of an exoskeleton. I didn't allow myself the time to study it, I turned my head back and ran.

I hadn't expected it to be there, I thought that it would have gone away by now. How had it even known? I've spent so much time in the ruin that was buried beneath the ground. I cursed myself for not waiting longer.

All I could do was run, one glance at the monster that was the size of an elephant and which ran at a speed faster than mine was enough to convince me of that. It roared, and I felt my body freeze. I heard it coming, closer and closer, unable to move. I reached inside of me and used my [Debilitating Wave]. I heard the beast release a sound of confusion and then a crash. The air blasted through my hair as the beast rolled right next to me and smashed into a tree head first. Its tail smashed into me and knocked me to the ground. That broke the lock on my body and I shuffled to my feet, running without turning back to see if the beast had recovered.

I heard it roar, but felt no skill, I heard it stomping after me. I didn't slow for anything. I tried to pick routes in between tightly grown trees, taking turns, and forcing it to go around the thick trees. It was faster than me, but it couldn't navigate the thick parts of the jungle as well as I could, I was smaller. A few times it hit a tree, and I heard the cracking of wood, but I never turned around to check. I knew that I had to navigate back to where I came from, to hide back in the ruin until I could figure out something.

I jumped over a root and landed on another covered in red moss, it gave beneath my feet, and I tumbled to the ground. I tried to control my fall, but it wasn't enough. I rolled to my feet, but the monster was right behind me, I could hear it. I spun while still on the ground, rising to my knees and pulling the glaive from my back in one smooth move, then it swiped in a wide arc. I caught its snout with the edge of it, drew a tiny gash across the side of it. It snapped back blindly as it shook its head in surprise. The claws caught me across the side of my body, opening up my stomach. I hit the ground and rolled, and looked up weakly.

The monster shook its head, then its eyes lasered in on me.

It opened its mouth and roared, and my body froze, my limbs locked in position. No matter what I tried, I couldn't move. Then, its maw drew close, razor-sharp teeth ready to bite my head off.

I knew in that moment that this was it, I would die without knowing where I was, or what happened. And I couldn't even close my eyes.

I saw a flash of white-blue light in the corner of my eye, behind the beast, and then I heard something inside my head, almost as if it was sound. It lasted for less than a moment, but in my mind it unraveled as if it was said slowly, with control and with calm.

[Great Slash]