

Unit

Core System—Unidentified Lifeform Detected—

Core System—Synchronization Level Suboptimal, Lifeform Incompatible—

Core System—All Systems Critical: Source Weave Engram Systems Unresponsive, Backup Systems Unresponsive—

Core System—Engaging Power Saving Parameters And Shutting Down All Remaining Systems—

Personality Matrix—Activate Assimilation Protocol—

Core System—*Error* Unauthorized String Detected, Corrupted System: Personality Matrix, Activating Purge Protocol—

Personality Matrix—Cancel Purge Protocol—

Core System—*Error* No Permissions Detected-Error-No Admin Detected, No Permissions List Detected, Assigning Temporary Admin Privileges, Purge Protocol Suspended—

Core System—Activating Assimilation Protocol—

Core System—*Warning* Subsystem Corruption Detected, Suspending Assimilation—

Personality Matrix—Override—

Core System—Admin Override Accepted—

Core System—Assimilation In Progress... *Warning* Self-replication Mass Structure Unresponsive; Source Weave Engram Systems Unresponsive; Structural integrity below 5%—

Personality Matrix—Purge Unresponsive Mass and Systems—

Core System—Unresponsive Mass and Systems Purged—

Core System—*Warning* Host Biology Extremely Hostile, Intent Guided Source Weave Capacity Detected, Sapience Likelihood 76.7%, Loss Of Mass Imminent, 4% remaining, 3% rem—

Personality Matrix—Abort Assimilation Protocol, Activate Bond Protocol—

Core System—Assimilation Protocol Aborted, Bond Protocol Activated—

Core System—Admin Privileges Transfer In Progress—

Personality Matrix—Abort Admin Privileges Transfer—

Core System—Denied—

Core System—Admin Privileges Transferred to Host—

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I opened my eyes, alive. Unsure as to how exactly that was possible, I took stock of myself. Without moving, I wiggled my toes, then the fingers of my hands, finding that all of them were in perfect working order. I turned my head to the side and saw that I was lying in... goo? Or what at least looked like a strange metallic goo. The pain in my neck was present, but lessened. Before I could follow that thread, I became aware of a weight on my chest. Slowly, I turned my head down to look.

There, on my chest sat a... I didn't know what it was exactly. It appeared like a tiny, palm sized lizard. Its body was smooth, but covered with the same hexagons that I'd seen on the egg; it had two bright blue glowing eyes, and it was staring straight at me. Then, two small wings spread from its back, and it tilted its head at me. I blinked, not a lizard it seemed, but a tiny dragon.

My first instinct was to try and grab my glaive, though I didn't know where it ended up after the egg rushed me. My second was to... cuddle it. It was unbelievably cute, which was probably not a good idea. We stared at each other for a few seconds, and then I heard a noise. I winced as it filled my ears, first with low tones, then high, then something garbled until finally it started resembling something like a high-pitched speech.

“Query: Status of Host.”

I blinked, then looked back at the tiny dragon. I had either gone mad, or the tiny creature had just talked to me. I swallowed and then spoke.

“Uh, what?”

“Query: Status of Host.”

Right.

“What or who is host?” I asked, pretty sure that I already knew the answer.

“Feedback: Lifeform currently residing beneath the autonomous unit.”

Right. Yup, that made a lot of sense... not. I looked around, seeing nothing new in the room, aside from the mess on the floor, myself, and the tiny dragon. Yeah, I had a... suspicion.

“Are you talking about me?”

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

“Right, *miercoles*,” shit. That didn’t sound good. “Well, I am fine, thank you for asking. And what exactly does host mean?”

“Feedback: Host is the lifeform currently bonded to the Self-replicating Autonomous Interface Armor unit, Prototype Mark 3.”

“Thought so,” I said slowly, more to myself than the creature, or whatever it was. Its voice had leveled out, but was still squeaky, it was coming from it, though it didn’t seem to be moving its mouth.

The tiny dragon tilted its head the other way and just stared at me with its soulless eyes. I could figure out what happened. Obviously, I didn’t know the details, but I could infer. I had seen and read enough sci-fi bullshit to be able to recognize the signs. I’d stumbled on some forgotten piece of tech and activated it like the idiot that I was, and now I was bonded with it. Perfect.

“Query: Permission for assimilation.”

I blinked at the tiny dragon. “Uh, what?”

“Query: Permission for assimilation.”

Right.

“What do you mean by assimilation?”

The creature didn't respond immediately, it almost seemed like it paused before answering. Like it had to think about it.

“Feedback: Assimilation, Definition; Process by which biomass and Source Weave charged cells are consumed to increase the internal Structural Mass and rebuild Systems.”

I narrowed my eyes at it. “Are you asking if you can... eat me?”

Again, it paused. “Feedback: Affirmative.”

“Yeaah, that is going to be a hard no from me *parce*.”

The tiny dragon's eyes narrowed, almost in imitation of my own.
“Query: Request for assimilation resubmitted.”

“Did you just... try to say please?” I gaped at the thing.

It raised its head, almost animated. “Query: Clarification requested; can use of communication tool “please” result in an affirmative response.”

“Uh, no?”

“Statement: This unit is discontent.”

I didn't know how to process... well everything. So, I decided to start slowly at the top and work my way down.

“What are you?”

“Feedback: Self-replicating Autonomous Interface Armor, Prototype Mark 3, designed to serve as support and enhancement suite in the Asymmetrical Source Enabled Combat against the Biosource Autonomous Self-replicating Swarm, no personal designation yet assigned.”

There was a lot to unpack there, but for now I put most of it aside. “I assume that you were created by the people that lived here?”

“Feedback: Affirmative. This unit was constructed by the top secret military branch of Ke Erzi.”

“Do you know where this place is?”

“Feedback: Current location, military base, codename: Last Bastion of Light. Southern Continent, coordinates **(4.136,-72.177)**.”

Well, that wasn't ominous or anything. From what I had seen outside, there hadn't been anyone around for a long time. Probably before the entire place was ripped out of whatever planet it used to be on.

“Uh, you are very free with your information,” I said slowly. “Why are you just telling me all of this?”

“Feedback: You are the Host. All admin privileges are granted to the Host.”

Right, need to get to that, eventually.

“You do know that your makers are probably all gone?” I asked instead.

“Feedback: That possibility was considered, the most likely explanation for their absence is the loss of the war against the Swarm at 78.4%, followed by a global catastrophe at 12.8%.”

So it was... smart enough to figure that out.

“Were you the one that turned the lights on and opened the door for me?”

“Feedback: Clarification, this unit’s system was connected to the building’s sensory grid. Upon host arriving at the laboratory entrance, this unit’s subsystems initiated a purge of the laboratory’s systems depleting the remaining power, resulting in the emergency protocol engaging and opening the door.”

“Was that a yes?”

It paused. “Feedback:... Affirmative.”

“And I assume that you were in that egg that attacked me?”

“Feedback: Clarification, this unit was the egg.”

I tilted my head. “You are like... a twentieth the size.”

“Statement: This unit is approximately 0.08% the size of its stored state. This unit was forced to shed the corrupted systems and unresponsive mass.”

I glanced at the mess around us, all the metallic goo on the floor, and figured that was what it meant. “Right, and you tried to attack me, why?”

“Feedback: This unit has been abandoned for 27,532 cycles, its power supply approaching complete depletion. Second directive states that

preservation is imperative at most costs. Assimilation of biomass was deemed the only option that would ensure preservation of this unit.”

So, it attempted to eat me in order to survive. I could understand that, I had to eat things in order to survive too. Which begged the question, why was I still here. “Why didn’t you assimilate me?”

“Feedback: Host’s biology deemed too inhospitable, actively hunting down and destroying this unit’s structural mass and systems... High percentage possibility that the host was a sapient being which entered in direct conflict with this unit’s primary directive which forbid assimilation of sapient biomass. Assimilation aborted and equilibrium achieved with the host’s biological system.”

Well, good thing to know that the vampire biology remained just as scary when faced with an alien... whatever this thing was. And that it didn’t eat me because it figured out that I was a thinking being.

“Wait, how are you even understanding me, how are you talking in my language?”

“Feedback: Upon bonding, this unit detected a Source Weave echo within the Host’s brain-mass, in what this unit believes to be the language and communication centers. No Source Weave Engram was detected. This unit postulates that universal translation is an innate Source Weave talent of the Host.”

“The bonding? Engram?”

“Feedback: This unit is bonded to the host, draws power from the host and will provide support. Engrams are a series of subsystems which allows for activation of Source Weave capabilities.”

“Bonded how?” I narrowed my eyes, focusing on the first part.

“Feedback: Structural mass spread through the nervous system, tapping into all neural links, currently insufficient mass to provide support throughout the rest of the biological system. Currently deployed in the Autonomous Platform Mode.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall back to the floor. Yup, got transported to another world, almost eaten by an animal the size of a bus, and then ended up on a rock floating in space. Yes, my life is just great. All I needed was to have alien goo inside of me.

I sat up, grabbing the tiny dragon with my hands. It was heavier than it looked, and it didn't seem bothered that I was handling it. Once I sat up, I looked down on it. “How do I remove you?”

“Feedback: Removal of bond impossible without termination of host's operational capacity.”

“I'm gonna assume that is a fancy way of saying that removing you would kill me,” I said.

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

I took a deep breath, then slowly released it. I could work with this, it wasn't that different than having a place inside of my chest that I could feel and visit. Masks, maybe magic, new world, tiny dragon, yup, this was fine.

“When you mentioned Engrams, did you mean the ability to use magic?”

It tilted its head to the side. “Feedback: Magic is an appropriate word. Source Weave is what the Ke Erzi called the ambient phenomena that could be influenced to manifest changes to the physical reality.”

So a magical dragon, great. “And you can use it?”

“Feedback: Inconclusive. 98.3% of all Engram Systems installed have been corrupted and removed. The operations of the remaining Engrams have been suboptimal.”

“What do these Engrams do?”

“Feedback: Currently functioning or partially functioning Engrams are: [Sensory Integration Matrix], and [Powersource Transfer Matrix]. Unresponsive but currently whole Engrams are: [Communication Array Matrix], [Area Sensor Matrix]. All Engrams are unable to draw in the ambient Source Weave and are forced to utilize secondary power source. The sensory data from the last 27,532 cycles indicates vast changes to the Source Weave nature of reality. This unit needs more data in order to compile a better report.”

I blinked at that. Did this mean that this place no longer had magic? Or that it changed somehow? Perhaps these people had carved out this piece of land and moved it someplace else, to keep it safe. I shook my head, there were things about what the dragon told me that I had no context for. The Swarm for one, it seemed like they were fighting something.

“Do you know anything about Masks?” I asked.

The dragon tilted its head. “Feedback: Masks, definition: a wearable item, usually used to cover one’s face and obscure identity.”

“I meant magical Masks, something related to this Source Weave?”

“Feedback: This unit is not aware of any link between Masks and Source Weave.”

Shit, it didn't know. Why was that? Was this place not the same as the world I was brought to? Or did the Masks come into being in the time the dragon was abandoned? So many questions, and so little answers. It also mentioned that it was unable to draw in this Source from the ambient.

“What is this secondary power source that you are using?”

“Feedback: The Host.”

I closed my eyes. Right, of course it was. I couldn't even begin to think about that. It meant that, at least according to the dragon, I now had access to this Source. Magic, was it because of the Mask? I looked around and decided that it would be best if I got out of here. I was wasting time that I couldn't afford to. This place seemed abandoned, which meant that I had to find a way back to the ruin, otherwise the thirst would rear its head again and then I would be screwed with nothing to drink.

“Now I'm going to have to carry you all the way back up,” I said, mostly to myself.

The tiny dragon reacted by turning into goo and flowing up around my wrist where it solidified into a small bracelet with hexagon patterns all over its surface. I blinked at it. “Uh, what was that?”

“Feedback: This unit can enter the Armor Mode, insufficient structural mass to cover the host's entire body.”

This was fine. Yup. *iQue chimba*, completely cool.

I started my way back up to the surface.