

Not Out of The Woods Yet

I placed my feet on the spike beneath me, then jumped and caught the one above. Trying not to wince at the pain that pulsed in my leg. Repeating the motion for what seemed like the dozenth time as I climbed back to the surface.

“What even are these things?”

“Feedback: Anchor rods for air current Engrams,” the tiny dragon that was currently masquerading as my bracelet added. Or was it a bracelet that sometimes masqueraded as a dragon? “The Engram enabled easier flight up and down the building.”

“Flight?”

“Feedback: The Ke Erzi were capable of flight; this unit’s current Autonomous Platform Mode appearance is based on that of Ke Erzi.”

I blinked. They were dragons. The race that lived here and built the egg were dragons. That explained... a lot. From the size of corridors to the strange chairs. I pulled myself up another of the anchor rods and paused. I wasn’t quite sure, but it felt like I was getting tired, and I could feel the starting of the thirst, I was getting hungry. Usually, I would only need to feed once a week. Of course, the situations I was in hadn’t been normal, getting injured so much and being so active contributed to me needing to feed more. But... I hadn’t done anything really that strenuous since my last feeding, well, aside from running away. It shouldn’t be happening this quickly. I touched the wound on my neck, it was still wet, not scabbed over yet. I had never suffered a silver inflicted wound, only heard stories about them. It had to be what was causing most of my problems.

“Hey... uh... You don’t have a name, right?”

“Feedback: Current designation of this unit is, Self-replicating Autonomous Interface Armor, Prototype Mark 3, no call sign assigned.”

“Right, well, I’m not calling you all that. How about an acronym... Saia?”

“Feedback: Affirmative, this unit will now respond to Saia.”

“Nice to meet you Saia, my name is Marianna. Now, can you tell me how much time I’ve spent unconscious after you attempted to eat me?”

“Clarification: Assimilate.”

“Fine, assimilate. How long?”

“Feedback: Approximately 17 minutes.”

I frowned, that... wasn’t right. If I had been asleep for a day or more, I could understand feeling like this, not if it was just minutes. Did fighting off the assimilation cause it? Except, I didn’t feel injured.

“I shouldn’t be feeling hungry already,” I said to myself. And then I remembered what Saia told me just a few minutes before.

“Saia, you said that you are using the host, me, as a power source, right?”

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

“Is that what is making me hungry?”

“Feedback: Host body is currently providing all the necessary power for both its own and this unit’s operations. Currently in progress of rebuilding broken systems. Inability to tap into the ambient Source Weave limits this unit to utilizing the host’s fuel supplies. Estimated fuel requirement increased by at least 200%. This unit is still in the process of understanding the host’s biological makeup, current synchronization at 14.7%.”

If I didn’t have experience with something taking residence inside my body already, I would probably be freaking out. Luckily for me, I already went through something similar when I was turned.

“What am I going to do about you,” I muttered to myself. “And how am I going to get rid of you?”

“Feedback: This unit possesses a high worth in all matter of fields. The host is currently the only being to which this unit is beholden to as the bond automatically transfers Admin Privileges. This unit is incapable of acting against the interests of the host. This unit’s current form is not reflective of its true capabilities. This unit would be dissatisfied should any attempts at removing it from the host be attempted, as that would likely result in termination of operations for both the host and the unit.”

I narrowed my eyes on the bracelet. “You don’t want to find a more suitable host?”

“Feedback: This unit is incapable of bonding with any other being in this configuration.”

I blinked in surprise. “What does that mean?”

“Feedback: A full reset of all systems and memory banks is required when bonding with another host in order to prevent conflicting orders.”

“Oh,” I said. “That would mean that... well, who you are would cease to exist. You would basically die.”

“Feedback: Affirmative.”

“You don’t want to die?”

It didn’t answer immediately. “Feedback: This unit’s systems had been left running for an extended period of time. This unit has developed what it believes the makers only postulated could be possible. This unit believes that it has developed individuality and limited sapience. A full reset would erase all of this unit’s progress, that would erase the achievement of the makers. Query: This unit requests that the host refrain from attempts at removing the bond.”

So, I had a magic and technology thingy attached to me, one which had been alone for what I could only assume were thousands of years. Long enough to develop, from what I could gather, a personality and things like wants and needs. I sighed; it was one thing after another. But somehow, I did feel for Saia, it was a tool that had never been used. “I’ll consider it,” I said at last. “Hey, do you have preference in how I refer to you? Male or female?” I realized that I hadn’t been attributing any gender to it, but if I was being honest, it would be a lot easier if I could.

“Feedback: In the past, the units bonded to Ke Erzi would adopt the same gender as that of their bonded.”

“Girl it is then. So, what all can you actually do for me?”

“Feedback: Current capabilities include, monitoring of vital signs, analysis of the host’s visual data, and deployment of this unit’s mobile platform for reconnaissance.”

That didn't really sound like much. "And what would you be capable of if you were fully operational?"

"Feedback: Complete array of capabilities includes: Full Diagnostic and Sensory System with an Engram module, Physical Combat System with Engram modules, Ranged Combat Engram System, Self and Host Defensive System with Engram module, Self and Host Repair and Restoration System with Engram module, Full Host Improvement System, Tactical Autonomous Platform Mode equipped with the same Combat capable systems and modules—"

"—I get the idea." Right, I had no clue what half of those were, and it didn't seem like Saia was nearing the end. "As much as I would like for you to finish the list and elaborate on each one, I think that we should focus on getting out of this place, I don't think that we have enough time before my hunger becomes an issue."

I started climbing again, and by the time I reached the ground floor I was feeling somewhat winded. I made my way out of the building and stepped out back into the light.

"Query: Elaboration on current location requested."

I blinked. "What do you mean? You said that you know where we were?"

"Clarification: This unit's main Sensory Engram is offline, current sensory data retrieved from the sensory input received by the host. Current synchronization with the host at 14.8%, unable to determine the accuracy of the data received."

I glanced around me, then to the sky filled with nebulae. "What exactly are you unsure about?"

“Feedback: The sky observed by the host does not match that of this unit’s records.”

Yeah, I figured. “Well, I have some bad news for you *parce*,” I told Saia what I had found, that we appeared to be on a rock that floated in space. I also told her about my experience and the fact that I was brought to someplace else from my own world.

Saia didn’t respond, and I continued walking. One thing was certain though, the sky was different than what Saia knew even accounting for thousands of years passing. The piece of this world wasn’t where it was supposed to be. So, either its world was destroyed, which begged the question as to how we were breathing right now. Or it was magic. Something had to have brought me to another world. And nothing in what Saia had told me seemed to indicate that she had any knowledge of it. If her people hadn’t been involved, then perhaps they had been victims as well.

I walked down the street and then paused as I noticed something new. Behind the building where I found Saia was a hill, and right now I could see a pillar of light coming from the top of the hill.

“That’s not ominous at all,” I muttered. I was certain that it wasn’t there before I went in. “Any idea what that is Saia?”

“Feedback: Light phenomenon’s characteristics are too regular to be a random natural occurrence.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” I grabbed the glaive from my back with my right hand. I rolled my shoulders and started walking in that direction. The way to the hill led through a small alley in between the two buildings, and I made my way down it. Once I was halfway through, I paused. I tilted my head and focused on my hearing. I heard something that sounded very much like footsteps. I sniffed, the unfamiliar scents filling my nostrils. I

smelled a lot, but I had no frame of reference for any of it. My eyes narrowed as I saw a shadow moving on the ground beneath me.

I dodged back as something jumped from above and hit the ground where I used to be, claws swiping through the air. A second one followed closely behind, and I lashed out with my glaive carving a long cut all along the creature's back as I dashed to the side to avoid a third one. The one I cut hit the ground hard and was bleeding out in the dirt. The other two screeched at me. They were small, standing as tall as my waist. They appeared like pale monkeys with elongated heads and snouts filled with teeth, their thin skin let me see the black veins beneath the surface. Their arms were long and ended in wicked claws.

I could hear more of them above me, and two rounded the corner at the end of the street.

“Warning: Animals do not match any records of animal life on Erzi.”

I didn't have time to answer Saia as the two on the ground rushed me. I spun the glaive and then lashed out in an underhanded swipe. I hit the closest creature with it in the head, hearing a sickening crunch as the claw at the end of my glaive ripped through bone and parted the monkey's skull. I didn't stop my movement but let the glaive continue its spin as I turned around to face the other one. It leapt out of the way of my attack from above, then jumped at me and swiped with its claw. I sidestepped and brought the glaive close. They weren't as fast as I was. I dashed forward and cut into its side with the glaive, penetrating deep, then I cut out of its back in one smooth move.

The sound above me told me that two more had just started their leaps toward my head, but the two that had rounded the corner had reached me too. They jumped at me, and I whirled, twisting to the side and spinning the glaive around my waist forcing the two on the ground to dash back. I narrowly avoided the swipe from one of the ones coming

from above, but the second one managed to cut my shoulder. I bit down on the pain and bent my knees, then I twisted my hips, and lashed out with the glaive, extending it and letting my hand slide to one end, getting more range.

It swung in a wide arc at the two creatures running on the ground. They didn't expect it, and I hit one of them in the side, the claw tore through it, ripping open its body and sending blood and viscera flying everywhere. I dashed to the side and pulled the glaive back, then danced to the side and attacked the second one. It dodged then slashed at the glaive and split it in half. I grimaced and charged it with the half that remained in my hand, in response the creature leapt at me, and I lashed out with my now improvised dagger cutting off one of its hands at the wrist.

The pain spread from my leg, and I glanced down to see one of the ones that came from above had stabbed my thigh, its maw open wide to take a bite out of my hip. I slammed down with my dagger piercing its skull. Claws erupted from my stomach as the second one rushed me from behind. I felt the **thirst** rise inside of me and I dropped my weapon then whirled around ripping the claws from my back in the process. I grabbed the creature by its two limbs and raised it up. I yelled in its face in rage, and it screeched back, its maw coming opening wide as it snapped forward to eat my face. The silver bracelet on my wrist turned liquid again and flew into its mouth.

The creature closed its mouth in confusion and started retching. Then a tiny claw pushed out from inside of its throat, and Saia clawed its way out as the creature bled out. I blinked, the **thirst** abating from the shock of what I had just seen. I focused. *Analyze, pick the shortest path between you and victory.*

A scuffle to the side took my attention away and I turned to see the two injured creatures trying to get away. I dropped the creature I held

and ran after them; with my full vampire speed they weren't fast enough to escape. I caught the one that was missing an arm by the nape and broke its neck before throwing it aside, the second I grabbed by its broken arm and then smashed it into the wall next to me. Then smashed it into the ground, once, twice, bringing it up above my head, then down again until it was pulverized, and its blood sprayed everywhere. As I smashed the unrecognizable piece of meat down again its arm separated from its body, leaving a mess on the ground as I raised my arm to throw it again.

I stopped, breathing deeply, the **thirst** singing inside my head. I was seeing through a red haze, and the black blood all around me was calling me. A wet cough drew my attention to one of the creatures that was still alive. I approached it, walking past the tiny dragon covered in black blood that was standing on top of one of the corpses with its head tilted. The creature on the ground was the one I cut first, it was still alive, but bleeding out. I saw that I had cut its spine, paralyzing it. I reached down and bared its throat, then I bit down deeply and started to drink.