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## [012]

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+Strength:                    5    ->    5+

Drenched in sweat, panting heavily, legs wobbling like protein-gelatin, I glared at the little pop-up. On one hand, I still couldn't get over just how much... more I could do. I hadn't been in a bad shape, becoming a guard required passing a physical test, and I'd been training five hours every week. So when I had set out to run around the AV, I was fairly sure it would take me an hour to reach my limit.

Four hours later, and I could see now the wisdom in Moreau and Bob's insistence that I familiarize myself with my body.

"You know, the number that comes after five is six."

+Strength:                    5    ->    5+

└ Endurance:                5    ->    5.000000000000000001

"You can't be serious." I glared harder. "That was four hours. Am I supposed to run until the sun explodes before it bumps it to six? You have to be making those numbers up. And why is endurance inside of strength?"

"Talking to your system?" Moreau piped up, offering a bucket of water. I just dunked my head straight into it.

"It has an attitude." Glowering, I dismissed the pop-up. "Says I gained a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a stat increase out of running around. It's taunting me."

The doctor's brows rose slightly, eyes widening for a moment. "I see." She stated with a carefully neutral tone. "It wouldn't be incorrect to suggest that not avoiding this path could not be detrimental."

I blinked up at her, then blinked again. “Did you just try to tell me to keep training in the most roundabout way possible?”

“Get freshened up.” She shoved the bucket of water back into my hands, ignoring the question. “Sensors picked up two E-class monsters and they’re moving closer. You’ll be dealing with them.”

There was an immediate shiver of excitement mixed in with dread.

“What if they do the same thing that happened in the lab and become D-class?”

“If it comes down to that, Bob will deal with it.” Moreau nodded.

The older man chuckled darkly at that, looking me over with a grin that made it through the thick beard. “Meaning we run for it. Only D-class we could take down is a gooper.”

The thought of being anywhere near a gooper made me shudder. They were made of slime, and as their typing suggested, they could turn biological matter into goop from sheer proximity. It was not a pretty way to go... nor a quick one.

“So if they turn into D-class, I die.”

“You’ll be wearing a magnet-lock, we’ll reel you in.”

I blanched. “You have a magnet-lock but not basic monster-grade weaponry?”

She gave me a pointed look. “Keep that attitude and you’re walking back to that tiny ditch you called home.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm. With her head, she gestured at the AV, I suppressed the urge to complain that FC02 was very much not a ‘ditch’. “Now let’s get you geared up. Think of it as playing out your now forever-dead fantasy of being a guard.” She added with a mocking smirk.

Grumbling, I obliged. I was kind of curious about what they had to offer.

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Model QTX-775, made by Atomic-arms in 2155, the Quantex was once considered a revolutionary approach to the issue all caseless weaponry had: heat buildup. The innovative part of the weapon was the usage of a liquid cooling system that was pumped by the recoil of the firearm. In effect, the higher the RPM, the more effective the cooling

system was at doing its job. Many scholars praised the Quantex for having pushed firearm technology as far as it had.

All the praise in the world didn't make the 100-year-old antique any less ugly. It looked like someone had dropped a glue-covered gun into a pile of scrap, forcefully impaling the thing in a dozen copper tubes.

It was uncomfortably bulkier than any assault rifle of its caliber had the right to be. A proof of concept that only became popular because it allowed to save-up on material usage for ammunition, and because it could continuously fire for longer than any other available firearm at the time. Basically, it lucked out into filling a niche humanity had desperately needed to fill at the time.

For twenty odd years, it'd been the best available firearm for humans needing to man the walls of any mega-city.

"Either you got this thing from a scrapyard or from a collector, and I'm not sure which is worse." The snark hid a bit of my surprise at how light the rifle felt. I knew one of the chief complaints was its weight, but to me, it felt like it was made out of cardboard.

"It's either this or your bare fists." Bob tossed me two magazines. "Best of luck."

"We'll be watching." Moreau added an ominous cackle as the AV took off.

Closing my eyes, I held back from sighing. This must be what the mice felt like when they were made to run through a maze. Except there were no walls, and the cocaine-laced cheese-substitute was me getting to kill two monsters.

The me of a week ago would've squealed at the prospect.

So why wasn't I hyped now?

I pushed the thought aside and pressed my finger against the earpiece. "Comms check."

"Loud and clear." Bob replied. "Hook check."

"W-" I let out a small shout as the harness around my chest yanked me a foot off the ground in the direction of the AV, then dropped me back. "Works." I shot a glare at them, they were suspended midair some fifty meters overhead.

"Monsters are south of your location, they're approaching faster now that they've spotted us. One is faster and getting ahead of the other."

"Type?"

Moreau chipped in. "It's a surprise."

Definitely a test of some sort.

A trickle of concern ran down my spine. Rules of engagement dictated to never move to an attack vector against a monster you knew nothing about. Getting the jump on one was far less useful than being sure the weapons you had could actually do something. Then again, ROE pointed at "run" if you were ever alone out in the badlands, and I had no drone to scout things out, so...

Quickly identifying south, I jogged towards a rock formation that would hopefully work as a defensible position.

The wind shifted.

"They caught your scent~" Moreau sang through the earpiece.

My jog turned into a sprint, dirt crushed under my boots. Four hours of jogging had helped me realize that normal sprinting had too much bounciness now that I was stronger. I clicked the safety off as soon as I heard the snarling, bringing the rifle to bear as the first monster crested over the hill.

It was a bird walking on two long legs twice my height, and covered in sleek gray metal plumage. Its gaze locked on me as at the same time mine had onto it.

*E-class, slicer-type, bladerunner.*

My mind flashed with a thousand warning signs.

"Fudge." I threw myself out of the way, right as the monster had kicked the dirt with its right leg.

I didn't feel the attack, but I saw it, a force that passed over the space I'd been occupying in an invisible ripple. The ground I'd been standing on half a second ago had been gouged, barely an inch deep, and trailing all the way back to the monster.

The bladerunner looked momentarily shocked I'd avoided the attack, almost insulted. It was the instant I needed to find my aim and open fire, barely feeling the recoil as sparks rained upon the monster's body wherever the bullets hit. The creature screeched out, stumbling back over the lip of the hill for cover.

Bladerunner, a fast monster capable of using ranged cutting attacks. It was no armored-type, but glancing shots weren't going to work against its plumage.

“ETA of second monster?” I called, running to the rocks and keeping an eye for the bladerunner. The cutting attacks didn’t have much penetration on rocks, and its effective range was twenty meters.

“Forty seconds.” Bob called. “Bladerunner incoming, your nine.”

Left. Raising the rifle, I shouldered the stock and tried to get a bead on the monster, but it had already launched its own attack. Jumping out of the way, I bolted towards the rocks, but the monster was faster, circling ahead of me to cut me off. Every other step it took, it’d send a slashing attack my way, and I’d have to waste inertia to dodge.

“Twenty seconds.”

Rather than bother taking proper aim, I clicked the Quantex into burst and let loose in its general direction. I must’ve done something right because it stumbled, buying me the breathing room to steady my stance and click to full-auto. The muzzle flashed, all sound was drowned in a rattling of gunfire.

The monster squealed, falling over right as the Quantex clicked empty. I reloaded, nearly missing the slot, hands shaking from the adrenaline and breath hitched.

The bladerunner wasn’t dead, it was still trying to stand back up, coughing steaming putrid black blood.

“Five seconds. From your seven.”

Finishing off the bird would put me at risk, could I afford that? The rumbling I felt underneath my feet said no. While keeping the bladerunner in the corner of my eye, I turned to try and get a line of sight on the second monster and winced as soon as I spotted the huge mass of putrid green vines approaching.

*E-class, crusher-type, wriggler-bush.*

It was the size of a tram, moving through lashing out with vines thicker than my torso, hammering the ground to grab hold, and pull itself forward. “Retreat, then.” I was already running away from both monsters before I could fall within botanical assault.

Wriggler-bushes were better handled either through fire or from shooting enough bullets to cut it down to size. That would be several dozen times the amount of bullets I could carry.

“I don’t have enough bullets for this.” I called out, panting between strides. The earpiece remained silent. “Do you copy?”

“Are you asking to be extracted?”

The wriggler wasn't as fast as the bladerunner, but it would catch up the moment I slowed down. “This weapon won't be enough to kill the wriggler.”

Another silence that was drowned by my own heavy breathing, my lungs burned.

“It's good that it's not the only weapon in your arsenal, then. Put those claws to use.”

Looking over my shoulder proved a mistake, the plant was actually gaining on me. “This was meant to test my aim!”

“And you did splendidly, either the curriculum has improved, or you put in a lot of effort. Top of the class indeed. Good job!” There was a faint clapping sound in the background. “The only thing missing to be perfectly ‘by the books’ would've been to ask for permission before every shot.” Her laughter crackled with the wavering signal from the earpiece. “Now that the good soldier boy exam is over, it's time to see what Axel the magubo can do.”

The rumbling was growing closer, I didn't bother to slow as I began to shoot blindly over my shoulder at the wriggler. “Magubo?”

“It's the first rule of science. If you discover it, you get to name it.”

“I'm human!” And also ‘magubo’ was a horribly dumb name. Someone should've taken Moreau's naming privileges away.

“If you are, then you've broken every landspeed world record in the past minute.” She cackled. “Now chop-chop. Those monsters aren't going to kill themselves, let's see that transformation in high definition!”

Gritting my teeth, I did a mental checklist of everything I had available. A severely outdated gun, with a magazine and a half worth of ammo. A maglock harness, an earpiece.

I was a human, dammit, I refused to give Moreau the satisfaction of having tricked me into this mess. I'd find a way to kill the wriggler without turning.

Somehow.

As soon as I'd resolved myself, a notification popped up.

“Oh fudge you!”