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## [015]

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There wasn't much to do other than watch the live feeds of the outside or just read up on cached content. I wasn't feeling much like reading, though, I was far too fascinated with the monsters down below. Despite how much I'd read up on monster behaviour, it'd all been within a vacuum, describing what to expect when confronting the creature. This was something else entirely. Some monsters would pair up and travel together, others would attack any monster that got too close. The horde was scattered, yet unified in its intent, the vast majority were F's and G's, with a fair number of E's and the odd D here and there.

I'd spent the better part of the trip just watching as the number of monsters within view were ever so slowly rising.

"How can they tell where humans are?" I couldn't help but ask, already guessing at the answer.

"Dunno." Bob shrugged from the pilot's seat.

The AV leaned to the side, and I quickly flipped through the cameras until I found one to our right with a bright flashing red square on it. But it blinked out half a second later, as we'd moved too far away.

"C-class." He muttered as an explanation.

I nodded along, noticing a slight shift in the terrain as it was becoming increasingly desolate. Well, more desolate. The brown dirt had started gaining odd black marks, it took me a minute to realize they were signs of combat. Some parts were charred or covered in soot, others had large craters. The unevenness of it all felt off though, there were a great deal of scars in the land, trenches that'd been precisely cut, yet filled out with water or sand.

As we were moving closer to New Francisco, I realized these were wounds left behind from over a hundred years of war.

"Moving through that terrain must be suicidal." I muttered, imagining the sheer amount of unexploded ordnance that likely still slept beneath us.

“There are a dozen railway access tunnels, their entrances are outside the yellow zone. You basically just load up on a train and get ferried in or out.” Bob explained. “The thing’s nearly a kilometer down.”

“That’s... impressive. Must’ve taken a lot of time.”

“Not as long as you’d think.” He shook his head. “Story’s well known for city-folk. Meguca called Diamond one day showed up, she could move dirt like nobody’s business. Had the first line dug out within a month.”

I whistled, that was... monumentally fast. Or at least I was pretty sure it ought to be, I wasn’t exactly knowledgeable on deep-earth construction, but making a tunnel hundreds of kilometers long was impressive. “Why aren’t we using it?”

“It’s a lot more expensive to smuggle someone into the city through the railway.”

It was hard not to jolt out of my seat. “I see.” I muttered. “And... who would we be smuggling?”

“You.” At Bob’s answer, my head snapped to look directly at him. The man let out a hearty laugh. “Of course it’s Moreau. If she entered the city the normal way, there’d be a bullet in her head before she got off the train.”

“And... why would someone want her dead so badly?”

“I never asked.”

Somehow, I doubted he didn’t know anything, but I had the impression he wouldn’t tell me even if I called him out on that. My guess was she’d “returned” several important items into her care, but frankly speaking, it could be anything. Though it was still hard to believe, Moreau was still the one who’d created the AK-01, so she must’ve done something big to have someone want her dead.

Or maybe it was just some super petty thing.

At this point, I was ready to admit I was well beyond my depth.

Apparently my silence had prolonged a bit too long, as Bob pipped up again. “Don’t worry too much over it. The doctor’s not gonna drag you into her mess.” He made a vague gesture. “We would’ve dropped you at one of the railway entrances if doing so wouldn’t put a crosshair on your head.”

“Wait, really?”

“The people who don’t know Moreau would see you, a nobody, coming out of a custom-AV. The people who do know the doc would see you, a nobody, getting dropped off before rumors of her presence back in the city start circulating.” Bob shook his head. “Someone somewhere would want answers.”

“If Moreau’s getting smuggled in anyway, who’d find out?”

He laughed, stroking his beard and shaking his head. “New Francisco’s no monopoly village, everyone’s in everyone else’s business. Nothing goes down without someone else finding out and selling the info to the highest bidder.”

Warily, I nodded along, wondering whether this had been the right choice.

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“This is going to suck.” Moreau grumbled for the twentieth time as she fastened a grimy blue overall. ‘GeoSynth’ read the company brand logo on her shoulder.

“Don’t forget the...” Bob pointed at his own face.

“Yeah, yeah.” She grumbled harder, pulling out metallic-looking bandages, wrapping her head and the electronic eye. By the time she was done, the bandages hissed and merged, making it appear as if it was one solid piece, with the edges digging slightly into the skin to sell on the illusion that it was part of her cranium.

“That’s... uh...” I hesitated, looking down at my own dirt-addled clothes. “Should I have a uniform too?”

“Nah, you’re just the slum kid we brought along.” Moreau waved off. “No one’s gonna ask, but if they do, we sent you to the bottom of the well to check on things.”

Bob, also wearing the blue overall, gave me a once-over. “Not dirty enough, actually.” He pulled out a couple jars. “Now stand still. Don’t want to get this stuff on your eyes or mouth.”

Eyeing the dark-mustard substance, I hesitated. “Is it toxic?”

The doctor cackled. “Highly. But not to a degree it should pose a health hazard to you.” She nodded sagely as if that made sense, watching Bob smear various parts of my clothes and body like some sort of artisan. “You look too healthy to be honest, so just keep your eyes on the ground and mumble incoherently from time to time.”

Whatever the stuff Bob was using, it reeked. It smelled like sewer oil, and not exactly in the “purified” way either. But I held back from making any comments, this was their show, and all I’d need to do was tolerate it until we got into the city. Then... well, I’d have to find out as I went, I guess.

“There.”

Nose curled from the smell, I shook my head. Three days without a shower, the tumble from the fight with the monsters, and now this. I was probably not going to feel clean until I got dunked into a barrel of detergent.

“Let’s get this over with.”

I shouldered the backpack that contained the entirety of my life (Bob had picked it up while I’d been unconscious), and we stepped out of the AV. My concerns over the smell of the goop were whisked away by the stench of biofuel and something else. Pinching my nose, I tried not to gag too hard, looking around.

We were in the loading-dock of a resource and observation facility.

From the outside it had looked like just another of those massive smooth metal towers that were fully automated. The insides were a mess of cables and tubes, with the center of the tower itself hollow, steam rising up and carrying with it the chemical smells.

“Where’s our ride?”

“Got to go up top.” Moreau pointed at the stairs. “We’ll be leaving on one of the transports.” Her face contorted with a hint of pain. “My dear little puppy is too eye-catching, she’ll get cut down and sold for parts.”

My nose wrinkled further, the rising fog practically drowned out the stairs, like the world’s shittiest fog, it would be impossible to avoid the cloud that I assumed was noxious at best.

“Told you it would suck.”

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“Some people... get everything... in life... huh.” Moreau whined, collapsing to sit down on the steps with a pained heave. She was drenched in sweat, breathing heavily.

“Agreed.” Bob nodded, drinking heavily from a bottle of water, wiping some sweat off of his brow.

They were both staring daggers at me.

I just stared at them, slightly confused. The climb hadn’t been so bad once I’d gotten used to the stench. It actually had been a nice warmup.

+Strength:	5+			
└ Lift:	5	[00%]	->	[07%]
└ Endurance:	5	[17%]	->	[26%]

Even the system confirmed as much, though I was a little confused at its choice of sub-categorization. Something to address when I had the chance to sit down and think.

“I helped carry your luggage.” I sent the accusation right back. “Maybe you should take some time and effort getting into shape. A healthy body is a healthy mind.”

Moreau glared harder. “My implants beg to differ.” She grumbled, taking the bottle of water from Bob and downing it in one go.

We’d reached the top of the tower, another loading dock, this one occupied mainly by drones, bots, and so many hoses I lost count. Looking around, I noticed there were four massive tanks, and a fifth smaller one, the hoses leading to them connected to tread-mill bots.

Notably, there were no vehicles here.

“Ride should be here in an hour.” Bob answered the question before I even thought to ask it.

With the older duo sitting it out to recover their breaths, I began to just wander around the hangar, careful to avoid getting into the way of any of the bots. I was a bit confused as to the lack of security highlight zones, and had to guess it was just one more thing the neuralink provided. Someone like Bob or Moreau could likely see the “don’t step past this line” warnings and how they’d move about depending on the task each bot had.

Then again, if I had my neuralink, then I’d definitely get bombarded with ads. Was it wrong to miss the colorful, bombastic flashing images? Everything felt so much more peaceful now, but by the same token, it also left me with this eerie sense of... dullness.

I'd get used to it, and if I ever managed to save-up for one of those "won't pop out of your skull if you transform" models, then the very first thing I was going to do was jailbreak it.

As I moved about, I caught a few odd scents, but otherwise nothing else that might've been of interest.

Eventually, the time for our pickup arrived, and I was looking forward to leaving. The hangar doors opened and the transport arrived. The thing was a massive metal brick, with twenty-odd thrusters all over. It looked like someone had taken a box and just slapped on engines until it was finally able to lift off the ground. As soon as it landed all the bots came to life, rattling and shaking as their unkept systems struggled to plug in every available hose.

A fair few of them missed their mark the first go-around, spilling some of the biofuel before finally managing to plug it in.

The pilot's cabin opened up and a man stepped out, wearing GeoSynth overalls, his face covered in more ink than skin. "The fuck is he?" The man pointed my way as soon as he'd stepped out. "We agreed on two passengers."

"We'll pay for him." Moreau quickly chimed in, walking up to the guy.

A second person leaned out of the door, looking our way, hand resting comfortably on the handle of his firearm. "You better." He stated with narrowed eyes, looking straight at me.

"Triple the rate." The first one demanded.

"Fifty percent over normal rate, and I won't tell your boss you repurposed some of the equipment to make you shroom-juice." Moreau replied without missing a beat.

Oh, so THAT was the funny smell from earlier? I glanced at the fifth container, wondering how she'd found out. Maybe she'd hacked into the systems? Was shroom-juice some sort of slang for a drug? I'd never heard of it before, but made sure to commit the scent to memory.

Tattoo-man growled. "I heard there's a price on your head, big one." Behind him, the gunner drew out his firearm.

"And there's a reason for that." Bob stepped forward, arms folded. "Want to find out?"

Tattoo-guy licked his lips nervously, while the gunner had turned his full attention towards Bob. I caught sight of Moreau discreetly reaching into the hem of her pants,

hidden behind Bob's bulk and making it impossible for the other two to see her pulling out a firearm of her own.

"You guys do realize we're inside an area with highly flammable materials, potentially explosive, too." I called out before this could escalate, pointing at the spillage that'd been caused by the bots. The poor things had probably not seen proper maintenance in years.

Both sides glanced down at the spreading puddles of biofuel, then at me, and then at each other. I could guess the maths running through the pilot's mind right now. Bob and Moreau might be an easy shot, but the moment the shooting started, I could easily duck behind the transport and start unplugging the hoses. At that point, this whole place would be one spark away from blowing everyone up.

"Seventy percent over normal rate. Take it or leave it." Tattoo guy finally spoke up, behind him, the gunner was tucking the weapon back.

"You've got yourself a deal." Moreau answered, doing the same. "Credits transferred."

A second of silence, then tattoo-guy nodded. "Looks good."

As we marched towards the pilot's cabin, I noticed Bob giving me a discreet thumb's up. The doctor was far more calm about the full thing, patting me on the back as we were ushered to the back of the pilot's cabin.

I felt mildly excited when I noticed this cabin had actual windows rather than just a massive wall of metal. Was it because it was some sort of older model? Maybe as some kind of protection against remote hijacking that Moreau's AV could take care of? I didn't know, but I was definitely looking forward to getting a good look at New Francisco.