
[021]

I stared at the text as I gorged myself on nutrient-chow.

'Stomach'

Grade: [G] [3 / 10]

'Shimmer'

Grade: [G] [2 / 10]

The meal wasn't exactly palatable, or really enjoyable, or really all that healthy. It tasted like wet cardboard, and had just barely enough sugars, protein, and nutrients to legally qualify as "balanced food". The only thing that mattered was that it was the cheapest option kilo for kilo, and I was on a severely tight budget until I found a way to get proper income.

I'd finished the monsters in minutes, and had turned back to human before putting on a change of clothes and sneaking out. The other guy was already gone, and if a clean-up crew was on its way, I'd been long gone before it arrived.

Then I came down with a severe case of the munchies. The sort where I ate half my bodyweight in foodstuff, starting with everything I'd loaded into my backpack. Fortunately, it was the industrial district, so getting my hands on chow had been easy enough.

Sighing despondent, I glanced at the text again. I'd killed one more shimmer monster and two more toothers, and just as I'd suspected, the "progress" had added up. If I kept this up, I'd be able to find out what it meant for an ability to "rank up".

"What did AP stand for anyway? Adaptive... points, right?"

AP (Adaptive Points): 2/150

The text carried a little sigh of contentment with it. The system was sated, apparently it had thoroughly enjoyed killing monsters. The fact that I could get AP out of every kill also meant I could've kept going for longer had I encountered more monsters to kill.

Who knows, maybe I could even face off against a D-class once I'd pooled enough stats? The thought was equally daunting and thrilling.

Charisma: 1 -> +2

"Thanks?" I glanced at the text, biting down on some more tasteless not-cardboard food. "By any chance does the charisma stat do anything, or are you just using it to show me when you disapprove?"

The text wriggled a moment in... embarrassment? The impression wasn't very clear, but it did appear to be pondering on the question seriously. I just kept eating from the large bag of nutrient-chow by the fistfull, doing my best to ignore the stares from the other people on the bus.

Charisma [5]: Permanent Upgrade Choice

Though the text looked simple enough, I got a weird impression that the system was trying to guess at something. Like it wasn't sure whether it would happen or not, yet held a certain degree of certainty.

"Are you just randomly guessing at things? Aren't you the one deciding this stuff?"

All pop-ups vanished in a wave of annoyance.

My brows furrowed, thinking back to Moreau's words about how systems apparently got more accurate over time. "I... sorry, I didn't mean it as an insult. You're learning this as we go, as much as I am, aren't you?"

The next popup blinked in and out of existence so fast I'd nearly missed it.

Charisma: 2 -> +3

Chuckling a little, I turned my focus towards what had caused this whole thing to begin with: my frustration at the neuralink situation. Now that I'd cleared my head of that whole debacle, I had to readily admit I was in a rather painful situation.

As far as any corporation was concerned, I might as well be someone who'd killed the original Axel Garcia, taken the neuralink from his corpse, and was now trying to access its contents illegally. Of course, they'd do everything in their power to cover their ass and block me.

Which... meant that I'd either spend the next few months trying to legally prove I am alive, well, and not some identity thief, or... I glanced at the communicator device Moreau had given me. With a heavy sigh, I resigned myself as I stepped out of the bus, pushing the green button.

It rung once.

"I don't know who you are, but I swear if you touched a single hair on my sample, I will fuck you up! Mark my words, you will become the sort of example that will go down in the history vods! There'll be content creators talking about what happened to you three hundred years from now!"

I blinked at the communicator I now held as far away from my face as possible.

"Uh... Moreau?" I asked. "I'm... fine? What's going on?"

A momentary pause, then the speaker crackled, voice coming through louder. "Oh, you are? GREAT!" She did not, in fact, sound great. "Why didn't you call me to confirm you'd gotten to the motel?"

"It was late?" The little pang of apprehension was followed by confusion. "I thought this line was for emergencies."

Another pause.

"This is Bob speaking." He spoke, his voice far calmer, there was a distinct sound of cursing happening in the background. One I had to guess was Moreau. "The doctor's not in the best of moods right now. It's been a long couple days. You sure you're ok? Not getting chased or anything?"

"No? If I were in that sort of trouble, I would have the red button, no?"

"Good to hear you remembered that. So what did you call for?"

“I do have a bit of a problem, actually. It’s not life-or-death or anything, but I think the doctor might have a better clue about how to tackle this.”

Moreau’s voice took over, harsh and frustrated. “Speak.”

“I need a way to safely connect to my neuralink accounts. It’s been a massive struggle, and by the looks of it, I won’t be getting anywhere the legal way anytime soon.”

Another long silence.

I fidgeted a little.

“Hello?”

“I must have heard you wrong,” Moreau said. “Is there some sort of corpo asshole in your way you’d want to disappear? Maybe you’d prefer a bomb being delivered to-”

“No! No, no, it’s just bureaucratic stuff. Normal bureaucratic stuff.” I quickly cut her off. “I need a way to connect to my accounts and tell the people back in my home-city that I’m alive and well. I spent most of the day trying to establish the connection, but-”

“I’ll cut you off right there.” Her words came with a heavy groan. “You called me, Doctor Evelyn Moreau, someone blacklisted by both the New Francisco corporate council as well as the gang-underworld, to solve an account management problem?”

I shuffled awkwardly. “I mean... when you put it like that...” I coughed. “I have some samples I could offer in exchange?”

This time the silence that followed was oppressive, I could practically feel the glare making its way through the communication device. It stretched out long enough I nearly thought the line had gone dead.

“Listen to me very carefully. I will be giving you details for a ghost-account. You will march your ass straight to the nearest remote-connection port and access that account. There will be one email with an attachment. You will download that attachment into a data-shard and upload it to the tablet.”

“And with-”

“Aside from helping you with your problem, it will also contain instructions on what to do with those samples.” She snapped. “Have you read the documents I left explaining how to keep yourself from being discovered?”

I shuddered. “Erm... no? I’d planned to do the account thing, but then I just got so frustrated I needed to vent and... well, I went to kill some monsters, and stuff. About that account...?”

Moreau let out a long sigh.

“This city is very dangerous, Axel,” she said. “You need to ingrain into your head some basic principles or you will end up on a dissection table with a whackjob thinking the best way to figure out how you tick is by carving you open.”

“Sorry, I’ll read up on that as soon as I get back.”

“That’s the least you should do.” She grumbled. “Also, this goes against experimentation protocols, but do you have any way to strengthen the attributes you take from monsters?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Then kill more mirage monsters, their scales have distortion properties that fuck with cameras.” Moreau stated flatly. “Higher classification monsters of the same type can make digital recording or targeting near impossible, you’re going to need that sooner rather than later.”

“Noted, I’ll try to make it a priority.”

“Good.” The doctor proceeded to share the relevant details, and I wrote them down on the tablet to make sure I didn’t forget. “And from now on, make sure to call every three days at least. Keep me updated. Also, don’t forget about the Sewer Stains, they’ll be showing up to get you some monster-killing opportunities. Use them to your convenience.”

Then hung up.

That had been... intense. Needing to hide from mercenaries and assassins probably wasn’t the most relaxing of environments.

Making my way to the “Internet away from Internet” store, I rented a room for an hour so I could download the files Moreau had sent over. The moment I’d plugged them into the tablet, a notification took over the whole screen.

Go to the motel, Axel, and don't come out until you've read everything. You will also need to do some tests with the silver fur as soon as you buy some gear I've listed inside.

Not wanting to anger the crazy doctor lady further, I packed up.

It'd been right as I'd reached the entrance when I froze.

How had Moreau known I'd acquired the shimmer from that mirage monster?

The television near the store entrance blared out as one of the customers waiting for their turn bumped the volume. I frowned and turned to get a glimpse, noticing the rich technicolor "clothes" that were synonymous with talk-show "guests". It was such a staple of the industry, having each person wearing a different color to represent one thing or another.

New Francisco's version included corporate brand logos plastered all over their clothes, which probably meant this was mostly a corpo-audience.

"-look at the way its body shifted, look at the pixel quality drop-rate, this was clearly AI generated. It's just some gonk trying to gain fame and attention. This alleged 'mutator-type' can only be a prank."

"The distortion could've been brought from absorbing the mirage's abilities. Its fur turned silver, and-"

"Both of you are making good points, but you are missing the broader picture here." A third voice called out. "If this were real, then how did the person that recorded it survive? We saw it pick the kid up and toss him out."

"You have a point there." First voice agreed. "So you agree with me that this is some sort of prank?"

"Maybe, but what if this isn't fake?" Third voice called. "I'd say this was probably a corpo experiment. Think about it, a bio-bot meant to kill monsters and save humans. It's not entirely far-fetched, the advancements in bio-mods have been pushed leaps and bounds these past few years after all. Who knows what's going on in those secret facilities?"

The other two immediately lashed out, squabbling over the absurdity of calling anything a conspiracy or a secret project. A fourth had joined in and had started giving legal disclaimers, reading out from a script. They stated the show was not trying to imply any New Francisco corporation was responsible for the “anomaly” nor any damages it might have incurred.

I just stood there at the store lobby, staring at the screen with wide eyes. Right there, front and center, was an image of a silver furred monster with blades for fingers, a digit pressed against its muzzle.

The chat for the show was going wild, one word repeated over and over.

“Shush monster.”

It was accompanied by dozens of AI-generated icons, images, and hype. But of particular concern was a field with the logo for “bounty, alive”, followed by a very quickly growing cash-amount that had already reached five figures.

I was suddenly very concerned that Moreau might invent a way to strangle me through the communication device.