

“Fascinating.”

Moreau was doing... something. She was jacked into the elevator controls, a cable running from the back of her head to the panel. Her electronic eye was mostly off, which I guess was a sign she was using her implants to their limit. But I wished she'd been keeping her focus on whatever she was doing, because having her looking at me so closely was creepy.

“You know, you're not a monster.”

I immediately snorted, crossing my thick quill-filled arms. Of course I wasn't. And I was also going to ignore the little wave of relief and curiosity, because I was pissed at Moreau getting me into this mess.

“Even an A-class monster can't be harvested while it's alive. Break anything off and it just evaporates. You need to kill it. It makes the process of studying them very annoying.” She held one of my quills between her fingers. “Not you... unless you're a new type...” Moreau kept looking between the quill and me. “You said something about a popup, when you were swelling and feverish. Did you get one when you killed the monster?”

I nodded immediately.

“I think you're not a wholly new kind of monster, but if you're what I think you are....” My right eyebrow must've gone stratospheric, because Moreau's first reaction was to scoff at me. “We'll get a chance to confirm my hypothesis once we're out of here. I'd rather not get your hopes up without solid proof. Just in case, don't try turning back into a human until we've cleared out, you might fall unconscious, and I'm not going to be able to drag you out of here.”

Snorting, I rolled my eyes then glared. Yeah, Doctor Moreau and her tricking me here had done wonders for my hopes and dreams. Actually, I guess it'd be unfair to dump it all on her, Terry had also fucked me over. If she thought for an instant that I was going to stick around after this was over I... well, I wasn't going to kill her, obviously, but... hm. What WAS I going to do after this? My prospects weren't exactly looking too reassuring right now...

Moreau poked my nose with the quill she'd been holding, and I yelped, jumping back and covering my nose. I tried very hard to ignore the decidedly inhuman shape to my face and focus more on glaring at the doctor.

"Huh." She glanced at the quill, then up at me. "I'll have to say, first time having a live sample that's not trying to eat me. It's a nice change of pace."

A what!? I glowered at her, but stopped when she raised the quill at me. That thing looked sharp now that I looked closely at it.

"Don't distract me."

The elevator shuddered, and I felt like we were moving slower now? No, we were definitely slowing down. I glanced around, trying to see if there were any indicators of what floor we were in, but of course there wouldn't be one on the elevator leading to the super-secret laboratory.

"Well, shit." Moreau pulled the plug from the panel, slotting it back into the back of her head. "So good news is that the elevator we're currently on isn't going to get dropped to the bottom of the shaft. Bad news is that they've slowed the elevator so they can prepare the sort of welcoming party you'd give for an angry E-class hellcat on the loose."

I waved my hands wildly around, trying, and failing, to convey properly just what the fuck had just happened? I'd thought she'd been hacking the elevator or something. Hadn't she stirred the drones down at the lab? She was a really shitty hacker, if that'd been the case.

"Don't look at me like that. I had a call, the technician was very angry that the cameras in the elevator had gone offline." She clapped her hands twice. "Anywho, the moment those doors open, they're going to take one look at you and unload a fuckton of bullets. The good news is that we can probably make it out alive if you can shoot those quills of yours at the proper electronic parts."

Glancing down at my prickly arms, I made very quick gestures towards the wall opposite to Moreau. I squeezed my arms, I shook them violently, I made a dozen more random gestures. Nothing.

"You can't shoot them? That's... inconvenient." Moreau looked a lot less panicked than I was. "I hope you're not limited to just smashing things, you look tough, but not tough enough for the sort of ammo they'll be using."

Bewilderment could not describe what I was currently feeling. Was this bitch for real? If NexCorp was looking to kill a brawl-type E-class swiftly, standard 'minimal expense'

procedure called for two 7.62×51mm miniguns. But this being NexCorp HQ, it would almost assuredly be a .50 BMG. I'd be a protein paste faster than I could beg for my life. Not that anyone would understand a word.

Without armor, it just wasn't possible to-

Durability Mode (3):

**** -3 AP / Second ****

**** -1 Speed / Second ****

**** +5 Toughness / Second ****

I blinked, and immediately felt a wave pass over me. It was like getting dunked into mud, but not as stinky. My skin felt rougher, dryer, almost... leathery. I glanced down at my arms and noticed the same strange effect. My quills were flattening, the wounds on my right arm were back to diminishing.

“Fascinating.”

Moreau held the thin quill that'd been snapped off earlier close to my arm, watching as every passing second the quills on my body kept becoming wider and thicker, almost like... scales? Very sharp looking scales. It kinda reminded me of ArmaD's mascot, the scaled rat that could turn into a ball.

“Are you doing this consciously?” She asked, poking at the flat of one of my... scales, I guess. I just shrugged at her. “How far can you push this? Do you have a limit? Is there a prompt somewhere?”

Actually, there was. The meter at the corner of my vision blinked down the “AP”. It was currently at “46/150”, and just as the pop-up had promised, it was going down at three a second. I glanced at Moreau and was about to nod when I felt a sudden sharp pressure in the back of my skull.

Then, the world went black.

Sight came back to me before I could even properly panic, rushing out with a sudden sense of relief and a clattering on the floor. There, covered in blood, were a pair of eye-augments and a... neuralink? Blinking rapidly, I touched the back of my head, noticing a distinct lack of shard-slots.

“Huh.” Moreau pulled a bag out of her pocket and very carefully picked up the cybernetics. “I’ll give these back later.” She spoke as if having one’s cybernetics expelled out of one’s skull was just an everyday thing. “What matters right now is that if you have some sort of limited resource, don’t let it drop to zero or you might pass out.”

It took a second to process that beyond the shock. I just blankly blinked at her.

“Well, this is going to be really simple.” She pointed at the elevator doors. “Buy me the time I need to shut it off, or we both die. Once that’s done, we bolt.”

There was something sombering about the ease with which she spoke that was chilling. There’d not been a shred of hesitation or fear in those words, just steel and grit. I shuddered, slightly surprised at the rattling sound that came from my new scales clapping against one another.

“Don’t worry.” She moved to the back of the elevator. “I don’t want to die. But if we do die, then we won’t have much to care about.”

Right.

I breathed in and turned towards the door. A quickly look at the AP counter and I focused on stopping it as it approached the single digits. Much to my relief, it did as I wished it to and ground to a halt, leaving four variables blinking at me.

AP: 1/150

Strength; 35

Speed: 182

Durability: 90

I wasn’t sure what the numbers meant, but I was about to find out if they were enough.

At least my leg didn’t hurt anymore.

DING

The doors opened without a sound. Before us, there was a long corridor made of metal plates, and at the end of the corridor, there were four turret emplacements. I’d barely gotten the time to feel a semblance of relief that they were 7.62 before their barrels twitched to lock on to me and began to spin with a faint whirring.

I raised my arms and tucked my head.

The feeling of impact against my forearms reached me a split second before the roar of gunfire. In that half-second, I realized my scales were giving me enough protection to stop and reflect the onslaught. But even with their inability to pierce through, it was like getting hosed down by a high-pressure cannon.

Lowering to a knee, I grit my teeth, if these turrets were following CYPHER protocols, then this could get ugly. As if to confirm my fears, I felt two of the four streams begin to deviate, aiming at different parts of my body. Looking for a crack. Meanwhile, the other two remained firmly aimed at my face,

“Stay still dammit!” Moreau hissed from behind me, her voice barely making it over the gunfire.

I'd been just about to start considering alternatives when the assault came to a stop. The sudden lack of pressure made me half-stumble forward.

“There.”

Finally free from the assault, I glanced around, noticing all the holes and bullets. A part of me was thankful they hadn't used something bigger, but then again, they probably didn't want to ruin the only means to get in and out of the lab. I glanced down the corridor towards the turrets that were now aiming at the ground.

“Now pick me up and let's hurry before-”

The lights on the elevator and down the corridor switched from their usual sterile white into a slow blinking orange. This was immediately followed by the all too familiar sound of a monster-breach alarm.

I shot her a look.

She glared back. “Shut it. Everyone connected to those turrets should've seen the clip on a loop for another thirty seconds. Something else fucked us over. Now take point and move!”

That much at least I knew how to handle, I turned right around and began heading down the metal corridor. One I was sure hadn't been here on our way down. I could clearly smell a faint, bitter trace of burnt smog mingling with the sweet smokeless gunpowder from the turrets, so this had to be the loading dock.

Just as we were reaching the end of the corridor, my ears picked up a faint buzzing sound, and I gestured for Moreau to stop as we peeked beyond the edge. To the right of us was the exit of the AV loading area, a gaping hole on the skyscraper, the gates still

very much open. To the left were a dozen flying sentries and four humans looking terrified and wearing a very familiar harness.

“We’re lucky they thought the turrets would’ve been enough. Money scrounging idiots.” Moreau grinned as she dipped back into the corridor. “Doors being open means reinforcements are on their way from the wall. The meguca is probably to the left; they want to use those poor saps as bait. The drones are just going to be annoyances.”

I nodded along. The slick black disk-shaped drones were too small to be carrying anything deadlier than the turrets had. Probably civilian security models.

Moreau leaned over again, looking to the right. “There are some AV’s over there, large enough to fit you. Their security is probably shit, but the sort of expensive that’d take me time to punch through.”

With a sigh, I nodded, knowing what my role here would be. I’d stay next to her and-

“You’ll have to pretend to be a monster and destroy the drones, just not push enough to actually go into the kill-field.”

Blinking, I frowned.

“Trust me on this,” she said. “The less like a normal monster you behave, the higher the likelihood-”

Leaning over her, I reached for the backpack containing all the shit she’d been planning to steal from NexCorp. She complained, but with a flick of my claws the straps were undone, and I was left with all that she’d come here for. I dangled the backpack in front of her face before clutching it close to my chest.

Moreau grit her teeth. “I was not going to leave you behind.” She scowled, looking offended. “You’re too valuable as a sample to let some two-bit corporation catch you.”

That was... definitely worse than what I’d been imagining. I glared harder.

“Leave it here and pick it up on the way back. Don’t let anything break. Lives depend on it... potentially yours too.”

Moreau bolted before I could properly make up my mind over how I could possibly insist for her to elaborate. The doctor ducked to the right and vanished behind the metal corridor, and I was left with the decision on how much I wanted to trust her.

On the one hand, she’d lied to me and potentially ruined my life beyond the meddling Terry had done already. On the other, she could’ve just as easily left on the elevator

without me down at the lab. The only thing I knew for certain was that she'd taken a lot of risk to get the contents of this backpack, and she'd just left it in my hands.

That... had to count for something, right?

With a frustrated growl, I chose to oblige with her request to leave the backpack in the safety of the empty corridor and head left.

Three steps in, and the drones opened fire.

I growled, covering my face with my right arm because of course that's where they'd focus their attack. The bullets bounced off of my scales, it felt kind of like getting hit by a bunch of tiny pebbles. Annoying, but not painful... at least so long as it didn't hit my eye or something.

So, with my head ducked and arm raised, I remembered I had to act like a monster and let out a growl. One of the employees squealed and pressed the button, letting out a shriek as the rope yanked him off into whatever area came after. I lumbered towards them, letting out growls and snarls, not really hurrying as the drones fanned out and began pelting me from every direction.

The other two guys were dragged out by the time I was only twenty or so meters away. Just like the first, they were yanked off into the darkness of the corridor leading out of the loading area. I was about to call the first phase of this act a success until I realized human number four was not moving.

They'd gone deathly still, paralyzed, as I got closer and closer.

I slowed, then stared down at the human. He looked my age, shaking like a leaf, wearing a set of overalls with a transport-company logo emblazoned at the front. The guy whimpered, still entirely unmoving, I just blinked, stared down at his harness and back up at him.

Fuck it.

Boop.

I pressed the button on his harness, claw sinking into the cheap plastic.

The mechanism activated, the rope went taut, he screamed as he was pulled away.

I made a mental note to put a complaint that the safety harnesses should have remote activation functions. Or at least proximity detection. But my thoughts were immediately

interrupted by the drones starting to fire again (had they stopped out of some sort of automated casualty-prevention system?).

Right. Now that there were no humans nearby, I didn't have to be concerned about anyone's safety other than my own. I leapt at the nearest drone, realized I overshot, had the drone smack my chest, and landed in a heap of limbs ten or so meters beyond my intended destination. There was a plastic crunching sound, and as I got back up, I realized the thing had broken... just like that.

Either these were cheaper than I had thought, or I was stronger than I'd expected.

Probably both.

The drones opened fire again, and I tried to properly gauge my jump this time. The distance had been greater than during my fight with the hellcat, so the growth in speed since then had likely something to do with that. The next target I properly snatched midair, and then proceeded to throw it at the second nearest one, missed, and watched the robot break into a thousand pieces against the far wall.

Ok, ok, I could work with this.

I just needed to get a bit more acclimated.

Hunting the drones down and smashing them to bits was surprisingly cathartic, I would've even dared to call the whole thing a fun and challenging experience. Each one I downed would have the others adapt and change their movement patterns, making it harder and harder to get to them. Unfortunately, by the eighth, the drones had either run out of ammo or just chose to conserve what remained, because they'd begun to clutter in the direction the humans had been pulled to.

It was at this point that I opted to ignore them and turn back the way I came. No way in hell was I going to set foot into that corridor. That, and I was concerned about the change in behaviour from the drones. Standard protocol dictated any data on unknown or new monster types was to be sent over to CYPHER so it could build a profile on the most efficient way to eliminate it.

I did not need or want to find out what the system had planned for me. So turning back, I headed towards Moreau. The drones were still following, from a distance beyond my easy reach. I could've tried to kill them, but this being the NexCorp tower, there'd be replacements coming my way in short order. I was relieved to find the backpack where I'd left it. And even caught sight of Moreau ducked behind one of the AV's.

A gust of wind blew through the open gate and I caught a faint earthy smell I couldn't recognize.

The back of my mind tensed with a sense of apprehension, and I reacted more out of some unknown instinct than actual thought. Lunging straight towards Moreau's position, I moved to take cover behind the AV. The doctor barely even looked at me as she kept glaring harder at the vehicle as if its mere existence was an affront to reality.

"This little shit has an attitude problem." She hissed between gritted teeth.

Just as I was about to question why I'd hurried over, I spotted a whirlwind of red sand surging up through the exterior of the building and into the AV loading dock. From the tornado emerged a singular woman dressed in loose, flowing, iron-rust garbs.

It was impossible to mistake her for anyone else, I'd seen her features countless times in just as countless ads. One of the three meguca protectors of Frontier City 02, Sahara was here.

Only... only now that I looked at her, I could only blink in confusion because there was something distinctly recognizable about her. Something that had never been there in the ads or the clips or the docu-series'. It was the same face I saw every week, sitting behind the corner of my favorite dollar store.

"Kali?"

As soon as I spoke, the meguca snapped to look my way, our eyes locked. If there was any recognition of who I was, she did not show it. At a gesture of her hand, the sandstorm was upon us.