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## [000n] (Pilot)

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Marcus' breath echoed in his ears over the thundering whirl of the minigun. His helmet was tight against his jaw, internal fans whirred to keep his visor from fogging up, worn Nano-Grip™ gloves clutching the steering wheel. His neuralink chirped again, requesting him to jack into the car's interface to control it through his mind. Unfortunately, the jack had broken five years ago, and Marcus liked it that way.

There were too many numbers and variables. He preferred the intuitive touch of his fingers, feeling how he had to fight against the uneven terrain as well as the minigun's recoil.

It was terrifying.

It was exhilarating.

There were no windows to look through, every surface covered by composite metal-ceramic plates as Marcus relied entirely on the HUD within his helmet to navigate. Ahead of them, the terrain flattened into a minefield, the on-board RFID system signaling to each explosive device they were friendlies. Not that Marcus trusted the damn thing; just about every piece of technology within his reach was at least a decade old and 30% patchwork.

"It's gaining on us!" The gunner, Irwin, screamed through the comms.

"I know!" He growled through clenched teeth, sparing only a glance at the video-feed in the top-right corner of his HUD. It showed footage from a drone that flew overhead, giving him a top-down view of their current situation.

It was not good.

Their armored buggy was the last of a platoon, thirty vehicles just like it lay in ruins spread all over the battlefield. All felled at the hands of a singular foe. It was a monster larger than any Marcus had ever seen, it reminded him of a beetle, if one had come straight out of hell. Its body was the size of a building and littered in wicked spikes. Its eyes, compound and unblinking, carried an eerie purple glow full of hate. And its legs,

twelve in total, moved underneath it in a whirlwind of claws and blades, allowing it to move faster than it had any right to.

Whatever bullshit allowed the B-class monster to ignore the cube-law was also the reason why the 30mm ammunition vanished through its body as if it weren't really there. That had been the first nasty surprise they'd encountered, their city's very own first phase-type monster. Not that its ability to become intangible mattered, every time their shots had managed to land, they'd just bounced off of that impenetrable carapace.

"Tower control," He called out through the comms-system, voice becoming slightly shrill as he pushed the vehicle to its limit. "We can't keep this up much longer!"

"This is tower control." The smooth female voice came out cold and mechanical through the comms. "CYPHER estimates three minutes until the main body is vulnerable."

"THREE MINUTES!?" Irwin screamed. "This thing will stomp us in under two!"

Irwin wasn't wrong. Nothing they did had slowed the monster, let alone stop it. The creature was already too tough to damage through normal means, but that phasing business had turned this fight into a game of building-sized cats and tiny mice.

"Three minutes, Unit Bravo." Tower Control pressed. "We have Aqua on standby, but if the monster gets too close to the city..."

Marcus' eyes turned towards the dashboard, of a small picture of a young boy, the timer on his HUD counting down. It felt like an eternity, every second looming closer. Thirty seconds as he breathed in to clear his thoughts, gritting his teeth. "Tower Control, requesting an open wallet."

The response was immediate. "Granted."

"Parts of its legs are still tangible, aren't they?" He asked. "Can you set the mines so they explode before it steps on them?"

The thuds of the monster's every step could be felt through his seat. The lower parts of the monster's dozen legs had been the only solid part. But nothing had managed to punch through.

"Done."

The moment the monster reached the minefield, the high-yield explosives went off in an upward rain of penetrating shrapnel. The monster roared, not in pain but indignation, its

twelve legs grasping at the earth to regain its footing. In the end, it hadn't even scratched the monster, but the constant explosions slowed it down, allowing Marcus and Irwin to gain some distance... but not enough.

He spared a glance to the right, at the tall walls of the city far off in the distance. The vehicle's camera caught a singular dot of light rising up into the sky like a compressed sunrise, on-board systems helpfully tagging it.

Aqua.

"Irwin, I need you to lock that damn minigun to point straight back... and put it whatever rpm it can reach."

The man burst out in hysterical laughter. "Only if I can use the mother fucking explosives!"

*"Swear word detected."* A smooth female AI voice spoke through their headset. *"Unit Bravo has been deducted one point. Report sent."*

"Up yours, you synthetic piece of garbage!"

*"Abusive language detected."* The smooth female AI voice chirped again. *"Unit Bravo has been deducted three points. Report sent."*

Marcus held back from opening his mouth and having another deduction, glaring openly at the HUD. "If you get us docked..." It was hard enough following *'model behaviour'* during normal routine, let alone while in the thick of it.

"If we survive this, I'm paying for your drinks until we retire!" As Irwin said this, a notification appeared on Marcus' HUD. The fire-rate cap had been removed from the minigun. "Keep us steady!"

"Short bursts!" Marcus shouted. "Don't waste it all in one go!"

The whirl of gunfire turned into a short buzz, and Marcus felt himself sinking into his seat. The HUD displaying their remaining ammunition had gone down by a fourth within the span of barely a second's worth of fire. Behind them the monster roared, a sound like nails grinding through metal, clearly more frustrated over the escaping prey than any actual possible harm.

"Could you imagine if that thing were actually smart?" Irwin laughed as he let loose another burst from the minigun.

Marcus shuddered at the thought. The thing would've realized they were leading it ever so slightly further away from the city. Or worse, it would've known from the get-go not to bother with the "distractions" and just bull through the defenses.

It would be a massacre.

His HUD displayed an alert the moment they finished crossing the minefield.

"ETA?"

"Two minutes... then there'll be a ten second window of opportunity for Aqua to do her thing."

He gritted his teeth. Everything had gone wrong today. They had two more bursts from the minigun before they went dry, and the moment the monster reached the edge of the minefield, it would speed back up. "What's the confidence coefficient?"

"CYPHER bumped it to ninety four percent." The Control Tower answered.

Marcus stared at the picture again, his grip on the steering wheel tightened. His HUD lit up as Irwin opened a private channel.

"Give it to me straight, Marc, you're never this quiet."

"The monster won't catch up in time, but... we're going to be barely outside the blast zone when our out-of-town celebrity does her thing."

Irwin sucked in breath sharply. "*Barely?*" Silence was the only answer. "Fuck."

"*Swear word detected.*" A smooth female AI voice spoke through their headset. "*Unit Bravo has been deducted one point. Report sent.*"

"Sixty seconds." Control Tower chimed in before either could tell the AI voice their opinion about its point deductions.

The HUD lit up with a blaring red alarm. "It's doing something!" Irwin switched over to public channels as the monster finished crossing the minefield. Its back opened up like two gigantic hangar doors lifting up into the sky. From within, translucent wings began to unfold outwards, growing longer and longer. The sheer size of them boggled comprehension, it didn't make sense.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

“Aim for the wings!” Marcus screamed, pressing into the accelerator until it bottomed out. The electric motor whined in response and he could feel himself sinking into the seat.

“Thirty seconds.” Tower control whispered.

The terrain was trying to fight him, the uneven soil threatening to turn the vehicle into a spinning piece of wreckage. Marcus’ eyes glanced to the right, towards the city walls and the gate there. The monster’s wings beat once, summoning a cloud of dust. Twice, the rush of air powerful enough to cause nearby trees to bend. The explosive ammunition ricocheting off of the translucent surface as if water sliding off a leaf.

“Fifteen seconds.” Tower control spoke with a shudder in her voice. “Monster is confirmed to have begun dephasing.”

Marcus grit his teeth, glancing at the drone-feed. The monster had lunged into the air, its massive wings turning into a blur of motion, a dozen dust-devils summoned in its wake. The B-Class jumped, using its wings not to fly but to give itself more impulse, launching itself in a graceful arch towards its prey.

Them.

“Control Tower.” Marcus grit his teeth, feeling his breath coming short, his foot long since glued to the metal underneath the accelerator pedal. “Tell Miss Aqua not to hold back.”

“This is Control Tower...” The voice hesitated. “Magical girl Aqua copies.” This time, the pause brought with it the sound of a shuddering breath. “Air-stream readings confirm the monster is fully corporeal. Brace for impact.”

With one hand letting go of the steering wheel, Marcus reached out to the picture of his son, grasping it tightly as his attention was now entirely on the drone feed in his HUD. For a moment, it was as if he could imagine himself flying far above everything as it unfolded.

From the walls of the city a streak of blinding white streak shot outwards, moving faster than any bullet, cutting the distance within less than the blink of an eye. Straight into the bulbous head of the monster from the side.

“Motherfucking piece of shit, go to hell!” Irwin screamed out.

“Swear word detected. Unit-“

# BOOM

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Aqua landed softly on the scorched ground, monster ichor splattered all over her body and randomly scattered around the terrain. Her gaze lingered on the torn buggy, metal rent and twisted, its occupants lying lifeless within. In its final hour, the vehicle had carried out one more service to its owners, keeping their bodies mostly intact despite being unable to keep them alive.

A part of her idly realized that, had both occupants been properly augmented with the right cyberware, then they could've survived. The thought was quickly thrown away. If they'd been able to afford such hardware, they wouldn't be city guards to begin with.

She caught her reflection on the dark ichor that pooled through the open cracks in the vehicle. It was the exact same image she'd seen every time she transformed, short blue hair, sparkling eyes, and a face barely old enough to drink. All of it wrapped up in the exact same frilly blue dress, an aspect of her alternate form she'd spent the better part of a decade trying to alter before eventually just giving up. The only thing that truly felt "hers" was the heavy black leather jacket she'd thrown on top, from which she fished for a cigarette out of a long ingrained habit.

A notification popped on the corner of her eye.

*B-class monster "Ghost Beetle" defeated!*

*You destroyed an armored-type monster of classification C or above in one hit!*

*+1 to all base stats.*

*Times you've earned this achievement: x179*

"I need a bath."

With an annoyed wave of her hand, she dismissed it alongside the other notifications that had followed. Aqua approached the wreckage, expression blank, eyes roaming over from the gunner to the driver. There was nothing about either that was noteworthy, yet she lingered, as if looking for something. After about a minute in silence, Aqua had been about to leave when something caught her eye. A tiny piece of paper peeking out from the driver's gloved fingers. Reaching down, she pried the gloved hand open, pulling out the picture of a child.

She hesitated, doubting whether to return it or not.

"Gravis, what's the status of the monster?" Her earpiece chirped, interrupting her thoughts.

Aqua frowned. '*Gravis Aqua*' was the full codename she'd selected back when she'd thought herself cunning sixty-some years ago. Much like the infantile dress, or the "magical girl" title, it'd been something she hadn't managed to get rid of. The marketing had done its job and entrenched it far too deeply. Fortunately, very few people used her full name nowadays, but none of them were the sort Aqua enjoyed talking to in the first place.

She pressed her earpiece. "Got the pop-up. It's dead."

"Disintegrating?"

"It's a proper B-class. All here."

"Finally." Relief and anticipation stained the voice as the doctor spoke up. "Those samples will make coming all this way worth it. Shame we're too far from a proper lab, the whole thing will spoil if we have to move it... we'll set something up locally until the work's done."

Aqua's gaze turned to the frontier city she'd just saved. Everything felt too quiet, too peaceful. She knew it was because this was just a small place, barely any monsters were attracted to it.

Was it this way in the other frontier cities?

Not having to actually concern herself with the ever-ongoing fight was... nice. Welcome, even. For so long she'd thought they were never going to escape or win, but this felt like a breath of fresh air she hadn't known she'd needed.

Off in the distance, the city's alarm sirens had finally gone silent, neon lights flickering on as ads popped back into place and the city returned to its everyday life. As if nothing had happened.

"Doctor Moreau," she said, addressing the corporate upstart that had pulled her all the way out here. "Will this really be enough?"

"With how much material we'll get out of this... yes, definitely yes." Moreau replied with a mix of relief and eagerness. "Five years, eight tops. That's how long it should take us to make the ultimate weapon."

Lowering her gaze to the image of the young boy, Aqua pressed a finger against the earpiece and cut the call... and wondered.