

“I know what you’re thinking right now,” Moreau spoke through gritted teeth, howling red sands bursting out from either side of the matte blue AV. We were trapped within a localized sandstorm. “But I’m going to need more time to break into the AV. We won’t be able to take it far, but so long as...” She was trailing off, but I wasn’t paying proper attention.

I was pretty certain Moreau in fact did NOT know what I was thinking right now, because the only thing currently running inside my head was “how in the blazes was Kali the meguca Sahara?” It shouldn’t be possible. Even as I flattened myself against the AV for cover, my mind just refused to believe this.

Meguca Sahara emerged a year or so ago. She’d just popped into existence and killed a C-class before the local duo had come out. Ever since, she’d shown up on ads all over the damn city. Back then I’d made the mistake of eating some of the hype, and to this day the Sahara ads still plagued my neuralink.

Wait.

I blinked, remembering that one time I’d spent over an hour openly complaining at Kali about Sahara merch being expensive trash. We’d gotten into a very heated discussion over the whole thing, and she’d been very protective about it. At the time, I’d thought she was just a secret fan or something. But now, dawning horror descended upon me at the realization.

I’d told a meguca her merch was worthless.

To her face.

Oh, God..

Maybe the turrets *should* have turned me into burger meat.

Groaning, my forehead thumped against the AV.

“What are you doing!?” Moreau hissed at me, gesticulating wildly at the sand that was currently being blasted against the AV’s other end. “Distract her! Fight her or something!”

I shot her a look of betrayal and tried to express my frustrations through mimicry. That was Sahara, THE Sahara. She was one of the three protectors of the city. I couldn't attack her! And even if I did, this was a professional meguca, she'd taken down C-class monsters, I would not stand a chance!

After a good ten seconds of wildly gesticulating until I got it all out of my system, I just gestured vaguely at the opposite side of the AV.

She sighed. "Nothing you just did made any sense," she said in a deadpan.

My shoulders slumped in defeat.

We were up against a meguca; I would've been surprised if there was some way to get away. Their whole job was saving humans and killing monsters. I wasn't a fanboy or anything, but Sahara's track record was pretty impressive. Some people had even been talking about her potentially seeking "the big leagues" over at New Francisco.

"Fuck, this isn't going to work." She glared at the machine and punched it. "She's playing it safe and steady. That girl's just gonna grind this piece of crap down to a stump and then blast you out the..." Her electronic eye flickered. "Now, that's an idea." The annoyance turned to momentary reluctance, then concern. "By any chance, can you grow wings?"

I thought about it, focused on it, and seeing how nothing happened, shook my head.

"Right, that would've been too convenient." She grumbled, and I had the common courtesy not to take that personally. "Bob's on his way - he's going to chew me out. This was supposed to be an easy in and out."

Bob?

She shrugged, trying to peek under the AV. "My partner." She kicked at the pile of red sand that was pooling there. "Scruffy, looks like he'd shank you unless you give him a choco-glaze. The guy that gave you the data-shard with the tracker this morning."

I wasn't even going to get mad about that one, at this point I just wanted to get out of here. Thankfully, the doctor looked earnest in her desire to do just that.

"Depending on how things pan out, Bob might be coming in hot. I'm placing bets on needing to jump out and into the ride."

Scratch that. This maniac wanted to get us both killed.

Now that the elevator turrets had failed to pull it off, we'd get blasted by the city's AA-system.

The red sandstorm around us redoubled, and I was reminded of meguca Sahara's style. Seeing her fight was not some exhilarating close encounter; she was methodical and relentless, avoiding risks while wearing down the monster until there was nothing left. Being on the receiving end of it didn't look so bad, at least it wouldn't until we started to run out of options.

Hopefully this Bob person would-

"I don't think our cover is doing so good." Moreau's words proved prophetic, the vehicle we were currently using as cover groaned and shifted with a screech as it began to tilt towards us. The paint had been sanded off, metal exposed and chewed through.

There was a whole lot less AV than I remembered there being a minute ago.

Moreau flinched and ducked, biting back a curse. A moment later, I noticed her knuckles were bleeding, the one part she'd exposed directly to the sandstorm. A moment of honest concern flashed across her face, she glanced at me, biting her lower lip.

"Hide here, stay still, don't make a sound," she said, shoving the backpack into my grasp.

Wait, no. I suddenly realized what she wanted to do, I grasped her hand, keeping her in place. Shaking my head, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, trying to ignore the howling sands and focus on one thought alone: turn human.

Just... turn human, go back... please?

But nothing happened.

"I'll buy time, you just get ready to run." She pulled away and towards the opposite side of the AV, ducking slightly as the metal shifted and groaned under the ongoing storm.

"HELP!"

As soon as she shouted the word, the sandstorm relented. I could actually see the concrete gray overhead beyond the cloud of red sand.

"Could you stop already!?" Moreau screamed even louder. She stumbled her way out of the cover of the AV, trying to make herself look dignified as she dusted herself off and walked out of my line of sight.

Meanwhile, I was stuck here, ducked behind the remains of the AV, red sand all over the place, and increasingly worried I might actually be stuck in this... whatever this form was. It seemed I couldn't postpone the existential dread much longer.

"Ma'am, where's the monster?" That was Kali's voice, alright.

"Fuck if I know. As soon as you started blasting my damn ride, it just vanished." Moreau spoke coldly. "If it'd stuck around, I'd be dead. It's commendable you managed to scare it off."

I wasn't ready to spend the rest of my life looking like a monster. What the hell would I do? Just... skulk in the maintenance tunnels and hunt smaller monsters? I guess dumpster diving was back on the menu, but that couldn't be a long term solution.

"Check the perimeter." Hearing Kali speak with that sort of authoritative tone made me cringe. She'd never spoken like that, even when I was cleaning the store.

A faint buzzing alerted me of the approaching drones.

I swallowed, huddling tighter against the mostly-destroyed AV. There was nowhere to hide, not without revealing myself to Kali. Meguca Kali. Fuck, that was still hard to believe.

The buzzing got closer.

All of this could be over if I just turned back. Why couldn't I turn back? The more I focused on it, the more I realized it was like having a muscle tightly clenched, holding on to something tightly.

The moment the drone peeked over the edge of the AV I froze. Its fans lifted bits of red sand in its wake, slowly scanning the area. Its cold mechanical eyes passed over me and... continued on.

As if it hadn't seen me.

I let out a sigh of relief in realization Moreau had probably hacked the thing and-

POOF

A whirlwind of red sand burst upwards and outwards, and I blinked as the world around me suddenly felt far larger than it'd been a second ago. It was followed by a feeling that was in between exhaustion and getting the air punched right out of my lungs. I made the mistake of breathing in some of the red sand and instantly devolved into a coughing fit.

"Who's there!?"

Trying to get up to my feet to make a run for it, I spotted my arm.

My pale normal human arm.

My naked human arm.

VERY naked human arm.

Crunching steps got closer, the sand began to vibrate violently, rising up as if with a mind of its own. "Don't!" I heard Moreau's command, but it didn't stop the sand. I was lifted off the ground all the same.

And there I was, suspended just enough over the AV's edge to see Kali's face as she looked at me. Time slowed, and I saw at least twelve emotions pass over her features in quick succession, starting in shock and confusion, and then suddenly gaining the same red coloration as the sand she controlled. The sand that now let go, dropping me back behind the half-destroyed vehicle.

My face glowed hot enough to burn.

The uncomfortable silence that followed made it worse.

Moreau coughed, a sound that looked suspiciously like an attempt to hide laughter. "Ahem, yes, mister Garcia and I were... busy, when the monster appeared," she said, voice forcefully wooden. "I believe the creature is still on the loose, it's obviously a teleporter-type, so I assume it should take priority."

"Right, yes, monster... right." Kali stammered, and I just wished the world would just implode there and then. "I will... get to that. I, erm, am sorry if I, uh..."

"Unfortunately, his clothes had been... dropped in an inconvenient location and were... sanded down." The doctor's voice dripped with amusement. "Would you mind if...?"

"Right, I'll place the call to get Axe-I mean, NexCorp will compensate you for any damages incurred. Both." The slip had been so fast I would've missed it if I hadn't been keenly attentive of the exchange.

But Moreau's questioning affirmation made it worse. She'd caught it too, yet didn't mention it, instead taking a sterner tone. "In my panic, I called for my personal driver. He's likely breaching airspace as we speak, could you inform NexCorp to let him pick us up?"

Kali squeaked. "Of course! Anyway, yes, bye!"

There was a whirlwind of sound, then silence. A handful of seconds later, Moreau let out a chuckle, steps moving closer. I just did my best to cover myself, not that there was much to use other than my own hands and the sand around me.

The doctor peeked over the edge to look at me with her cybernetic eye. "Don't ask questions until we're out of here." Glancing over me, she took off her coat and tossed it over before turning away. "Use that for now."

"Thanks." I mumbled, quickly fashioning it into an improvised skirt. "Should I-"

"Just wait." Moreau cut me off, gesturing at the drone that was still scanning the area.

Barely thirty seconds later, a small jet-black AV entered through the open gate, thrusters sending the piles of red sand all over the place. The side of the vehicle opened, and Moreau didn't wait a second to board it, bringing the backpack chock-full of stolen goods along. I clambered after her.

Unlike its external appearance, this AV's insides looked closer to an ambulance's, cluttered with cold metal shelves and locked cabinets. There were two small seats there in between the utilitarian clutter.

"How long until they start asking questions?" Moreau hit the wall twice, and the doors closed.

"I'm telling them you're in shock and can't answer." A familiar voice answered through a set of speakers. "Hey kid, your aunt-"

"I'll give you the details later. Need some privacy right now." The doctor hurried to say, pushing a button near her seat.

As she did, the speakers crackled shut.

I stared at her.

"You're not a monster," she said.

"I... figured." Being able to speak again was nice. My ears were still burning.

"Here." She reached over, holding a small plastic bag. "Your neuralink and augs." The pieces of cybernetic were still bloody. My blood. I took the bag with a grimace. "I can't install them back, I'm no ripperdoc, not that I'd recommend it."

"Why?"

"Because every time you transform, your body will reject it."

A moment of silence stretched on.

“So it’ll happen again.” I wasn’t questioning it.

“Can you still see the numbers and pop-ups?”

At her question I glanced at the corner of my eye. At the singular thing that lingered there.

*AP: 1/150*

I nodded.

“Then yes, it’ll happen again. .”

My brows furrowed. “I... am not the first?”

“I think I should confirm before answering that. Trust but verify, they say.” Moreau pulled open a drawer and brought out a needle. “Mind giving a bit of blood? Just a few drops, for science.”

I was too curious to turn her down. Moreau took her sample and inserted it into a machine. Then she pricked herself and put her own sample into that same machine. Fiddling around, she turned the screen on. “This is my blood.” She showed an image that was mostly white, with a lot of tiny red circles and a handful of green triangles. “Mostly red blood cells and a few nanobots.” At the flick of the button, the image changed. Same white background, but the red circles had been replaced by red triangles mixed in with a few smaller black circles. “And this is what you have.”

“I’m... not human?”

“Depends on the definition you’re running with, but I think this might help answer your question.” She flipped another button, and a third image popped out. One with red triangles mixed in with blue circles. “This is a database reference for what standard meguca blood looks like.”

I sat there and blinked. “Meguca are all female.”

“Yes.”

I looked down at my exposed torso. Not the manliest of torsos, but very much the same one I’d woken up with today.

“According to the scan, you still have the XY chromosomes. So you’re still very much biologically male.” Moreau’s biological eye glinted. “Which leads me to believe you’re the first ever male meguca. An extraordinary find, if I do say so myself. I’m certain there’ll be much to-”

“But how is this even possible? That can’t be right.”

I just... stared at the screen, and then down at myself. This wasn’t possible, this shouldn’t be possible. I was of half of a mind to insist this was some sort of hallucination or a wild dream. My eyes fell on my right arm, the spot the hellcat monster had burnt. As I stared, I felt a sense of wrongness; there were no scars there. It was something I’d never fully cared about, but I distinctly remembered there were at least a couple of them. Like the first time I’d pinched my finger while reloading my CD-22, a tiny nick that’d been at the base of my thumb for almost three years was no longer there.

“As much as I’d love to find out the answer of how this happened, it’s best we part here.”

Moreau interrupted me, reaching out and putting a metal disk in my hand.

“What’s... this?”

“It’s my personal cred-chip.” She tapped the disk. “There’s twenty thousand in there, untraceable. A caravan ride out of the city should cost no more than half that, so use everything else to get yourself geared. Oh, if you’re following the trend, then in all likelihood you’ll need to eat five times the calories just to stay healthy.”

“Why would-”

“This is a monopoly city, Axel. If you ever slip up and any of the hundreds of AI systems tag you as a prospective meguca, then you’ll be one blood-sample away from NexCorp sending a team to pick you up. Not in a nice way, either.” She stared into my confused eyes and squeezed intently. “If you ever look for cybernetics, get yourself models that have 19M2 compatibility. Those are the least likely to be rejected by your body.”

“But-”

“We’ll be leaving for New Francisco tomorrow afternoon at the latest, depending on how much heat comes our way.” She put a second item on my hand. This one I recognized, it was the same data-shard I’d been ‘gifted’ this morning. “Toss it into the sewer if you’d rather stay around, otherwise break the thing, and we’ll come pick you up.”

“I-”



The AV rattled, and the door opened, Moreau didn't wait a second to usher me out into the street.

"I think you can do a lot of good in the world, but if you want to throw your life away playing sacrificial guard, then I wish you the best." She called out.

I tried to complain, but she'd practically shoved me out, the door snapping shut before the vehicle took off in a gust of hot air.

Blinking, I looked around.

She'd dropped me in front of an auto-clothes shop on second-street, a place well beyond the price-range I could've usually been able to afford. More importantly, however, I was still naked save for the improvised skirt and barefoot.

I hurried into the shop before even more of a crowd could form, mind spinning in a wild attempt to catch up.