
[026]

As soon as I felt the cool motel lobby air hit my face, I breathed a sigh and glanced at one of the lobby chairs. I would've been tempted to collapse there, but they were all torn up and... wet, a matching water-damage stain on the ceiling told a story. My mind was too occupied with everything that had gone down after the hunting-session, it was hard to summon the interest to dwell on the mystery of how the rooms were so spotless yet the lobby so poorly kept.

It still felt like a weird dream.

They'd wanted me to "join their gang", but it was clear there was no mutual trust, not right now anyway, so we'd hashed out a deal of sorts. I would come in to kill monsters, thrice a week, two-hour sessions each. The "gang" would provide support, both online and not, managing everything that wasn't the monster killing parts, and all I had to do was show up and brutalize things.

All they'd demanded in exchange was that I remain consistent in my monster-hunting schedule, and that I never-ever give any other gang my "services". I had a feeling their demands would expand as mutual trust started to be established, but for the time being I was happy to start off as a "contractor" for the Sewer Saints.

There were other clauses, details, nuances. Stuff like wearing a mask to keep my face hidden, or how the payment could be higher depending on the monsters killed. But at the end of the day, the baseline was half-over the slave-wage from when I was working as a Bacon-nado™ "resource handler", for a tenth of the hours.

That left so much free time to do anything!

I'd obviously need to find a day-job, my expenses back home had been barely subsistence, and I didn't want to go back to that.

"Welcome Axel Garcia. Check-out time ends at 9-am." The droid pipped up, the silence she'd held the previous few minutes had almost made me forget she was even there. "Trespassers must be cleaned out of the premises." The empty camera eyes remained focused on me. "Would you like water?"

“Uhm, thanks? Yeah, I’d appreciate it.” I nodded tentatively, not too sure where this was going, watching her march her way out and then back. She was carrying the same blue water as the last time. “Is this water... bluer than before?”

“It is water. Mostly.” She acknowledged.

A tentative sip, and a slight refreshing taste of... lightning energy drink? I couldn’t properly identify it. “It’s good.” My eyes drifted to the sticker that was upon the metal skull. “I heard some people call you ‘Grills’, is that your name?”

The droid twitched. “No, my name is-” what followed was what I could only describe as the sound that comes out of grinding metal. Three whole seconds of it. Then the recording stopped, and she kept staring quietly for another three full seconds. “But I will respond to ‘Grills’.”

I shuffled a little, nodding. “How much would it cost to prolong my stay?”

With a twitch and a nod, the fans within the chassis whirred to life, lights within the chest turned on and off, and the head cocked slightly sideways after a moment. “You... wish to extend your stay?”

“Yes? I’ll probably need some time to find someplace to stay. Unless there’s a shelt-”

“Your stay has been extended, Axel Garcia.” As soon as she’d finished speaking, her lights winked out. With a creaking noise, she slumped, metal skull smacking into the desk.

I stared, blinking.

“You... ok?”

No response.

On one hand, the droid could be experiencing some sort of glitch, and getting closer might mean getting caught in some sort of booting-up sequence. On the other hand, I couldn’t just... leave her there... right? The motel doors were unlocked, and I could easily imagine someone showing up and scraping the droid for parts.

Getting closer, I poked. Nothing.

“Maybe she’s reboot-”

BANG

It'd happened in a split second, Grills twitched, and in a silent smooth movement, the shotgun rose from behind the counter. I'd moved more out of instinct than thought, slapping the barrel away as I did.

Mechanical lifeless cameras stared at me from inside a metal skull.

Then, the fans kicked on alongside the lights within the skinless chassis.

"The floor is dirty." Grills called, head swiveling away from me and to the bits of plaster that'd fallen on the carpet behind me. The droid let go of the shotgun, turned away, and marched away, vanishing deeper into the first-floor corridors.

My heart was still hammering away against my throat, ears ringing.

I very carefully set the firearm down on the counter. Then backpedaled, checked that the weapon had no live bullets left, and THEN hurrying towards my room. "I... will make sure to be packed tomorrow at eight." I made a very high-priority mental note. There was no way in hell I would take the risk and assume I wouldn't "be cleaned". If Grills confirmed I could stay tomorrow, then I'd think about it, but... yeah, not going to take any chances with a droid that had a fair share of issues going on.

Hurrying up the stairs, I wondered what was going on with the droid and the Motel. Was it a stray? I really hope no one would be irresponsible enough to leave a droid without maintenance for so long. What would've happened if it had been someone else? Or if I'd been slower to react? I shuddered.

+Speed:	5+		
└ Agility:	5	[48%]	-> [49%]

"That's right, guns are scary," I wisely intoned at the system as I made sure to use the chair to lock the door behind me. Then proceeded to pick up a metal cup from the bathroom and placed it on the door's knob.

Not exactly high-tech, but it should cause noise if anyone disturbed the entrance door.

Letting out a sigh of relief, I proceeded to wash up, take a nice long and hot shower (I was never going to get tired of that), and then collapse onto the bed. But I didn't go to sleep, no.

That morning I'd uploaded messages and information requests onto the internet through the data-shard in the internet-shp, and on my way back from "negotiations" I'd gone ahead and downloaded updates on everything. As well as an up-to-date list of listings for jobs, alongside more detailed information on the fourth district.

A quick check confirmed that the job-listings were pay-to-view, so I'd need to enter some subscription service at some point or another. And it wasn't like I could easily find news about the fourth-district and the job-market. My current internet-access permissions were as low as they could go, I'd need to cough up a tidy sum to be able to access anything that wasn't riddled with sex or drug ads.

Moving on to social media, I'd gotten a few replies. Most people had sent a congratulatory "best of luck" in the big city.

Kali had also messaged me.

Kalima: Are you having some sort of internet problem?

I frowned at the first notification on the list, opened the chat, and had been about to check everything else she'd sent when I noticed something else.

Something horrifying.

I hadn't JUST sent the message I'd composed after a dozen draft attempts.

The machine had also sent every single draft.

"The delete button is a lie!" I proceeded to shut off the tablet immediately before I could cringe myself into non-existence. "Why!?"

Of course, it'd been Moreau. The damn lunatic had obviously overlooked this, it was some sort of unforeseen interaction from cobbling this up in a hurry! Dammit all, now I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

It took a good twenty minutes before I worked up the courage to open the chat.

Kalima: Are you having some sort of internet problem?

Kalima: As to the MG stuff... open doors all on the table?

Kalima: I run the store because it was my mother's

Kalima: Revealing the truth would've ruined that

Kalima: You're a cool guy, but you can be worse than a fanboy sometimes

Kalima: Remember the talk about "Meguca responsibilities"?

Kalima: Yeah

"Fudge." I groaned at myself, slamming the back of my head against the pillow.

That had been shortly after my aunt's death. D-class rampaging in the industrial section of the city. A catastrophe that could've been avoided had the meguca made it to the scene sooner.

Back then, I'd thought that had the meguca made it there sooner...

"Fudge," I said again, and kept reading.

Kalima: I'm not mad or anything

Kalima: I'm happy to see you've let go of some of that

Kalima: Some

Kalima: Anyway, got you a graduation present

Attached was a photo.

For a moment I wasn't entirely sure what I was looking at, even though it looked familiar. It was a house that was full of sand? And were those legs dangling out of a mound? It took a second to click that this was a place I'd been to before.

It was Terry's penthouse.

Were those... his legs? I barked out a laugh.

Kalima: You know, since this is out in the open, you could come back

Kalima: Haven't exactly pulled strings, but I do happen to be a meguca

Kalima: Getting you into the Guards would be a piece of cake

Kalima: I really hope you're ok, Axel

Kalima: New Francisco is on another scale

Kalima: I visited back when I got my powers

Kalima: Place can be a bit... much

Kalima: By the way, could you confirm you're not an AI?

Kalima: Go to the Rusty Pitch, tell them I sent you. They'll contact me

Kalima: Sorry for the paranoia, but your internet situation is not reassuring

Kalima: And this Moreau is... she's very dangerous

Kalima: I'm serious

Kalima: Don't trust her

Kalima: She's the kind of threat you send a meguca to clean-up

Reading over her whole list of comments again, I took a minute, turning the screen off and trying to put things together. There was a very distinct reality that everything I knew about Moreau was a lie, that she'd tricked me every step of the way. How hard would it be for her to hide that my situation was caused because of her?

But at the same time, it just felt wrong.

She'd *smelled* honest.

The thought startled me a bit, the surety of that fact, as if there was such a thing as "truth" as a scent. It was odd enough I took a moment to sit down and think it through more thoroughly. I closed my eyes and tried to recall the exact smells that I'd taken in during that first transformation. At the time I'd been focused on too many things, and the memory should've been blurry, yet as I thought back, it all came to me in a rush.

Moreau's scent back then was bittersweet, cheap perfume masking the almost tar-like scent of fear, stress, and anxiety. Desperation masked behind a serious face. Stoic acceptance of death, hiding terror and confusion. I didn't know how exactly I knew these things, no, that wasn't true.

It was something else, something that hadn't been there a week ago. Like the knowledge of why monsters attacked the way they did, their desperation. It was... me, but also not me. Memories that weren't mine, distant, vague, yet somehow my own. I felt as if I were standing at the entrance of a cavern, massive and deep, its darkness threatening to swallow me up.

Hesitating for a moment, I realized that trying to scratch deeper would lead me deeper into this cavern within me.

I stepped forward.

Charisma: 4 -> +5

Suddenly, I wasn't in the motel anymore.

Standing in an alien yet familiar orange jungle, a humid breeze blew across my face. I looked around, confused, trying to make sense of what had just happened. I was confused, but unsure how, or why. Reaching out with a massive claw, I pushed the foliage aside, stepping through the twisted trees.

After what felt like hours, I stepped out of the thick vegetation.

There was a purple shimmering sea under a green sky, the red sun hanging overhead, partially eclipsed behind three moons. I paid the scenery no mind, walking forward, allowing the waves to wash up my body until the water swallowed me up, my own body devoid of buoyancy.

A brief moment of panic followed as I grew gills, then the lack of air no longer bothered me.

I continued to walk through the bottom of the sea.

There, in the vast infinite darkness, something shifted, something massive beyond comprehension. A thing that moved, shifting, creating tsunamis in its wake as it twisted its head to look at me with a shimmering golden eye taller than any skyscraper.

With a gasp, I was back in my bed, drenched in sweat, panting, shivering, my throat dry and parched, so impossibly thirsty.

In a scrambling rush, I bolted into the bathroom, turning on the shower, and drinking as much water as I could. The warmth of the water soothed me back into a more reasonable state, the thirst was quenched soon after, my head a twister of memories that were quickly slipping like a badly forgotten dream.

And one pop-up hovering right in the center of my vision, beaming at me with unspoken pride.

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