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## [003n]

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I stood there, eyes wide. I just... stared. I'd just gotten whiplash trying to process everything. It was like speedrunning my childhood, moving from the confusion to the anger to the grief to the acceptance. She'd done nothing, she'd been responsible for nothing. The monster had been the one to attack the city. And it'd been Aqua who'd destroyed it.

Moreau looked older than her pictures, much older.

That was the first thing to cross my mind as I tried to think things through.

In the pictures she'd looked like she was in her early twenties, but now it was clear she was approaching her forties. The screen-eye hadn't been the only change: her hair had grayed out, now tightly held in a ponytail, and there were scars over the portion of her face the eye occupied. I also noticed the synthskin on her left hand, the seams inlaid with metal. That meant the hand itself, maybe even the arm, was cybernetic as well. The quality work was the sort of expense that left me wondering on the number of zeroes in the price-tag. Which left me confused about her apparent age. Didn't high-management corporate have some rejuvenating treatments or something? I realized my thoughts were derailing, so I focused on the real problem right now.

What was I supposed to do here?

"It seems you need a minute." The doctor commented in amusement, the digital eye winking. "Not the first time I've left a man speechless, but it's usually a very specific kind of crowd."

"I just..." My words failed me for a moment, my brain slowly regaining some inertia. "Why... are you here?"

She crossed her arms. "Can't I be?"

"No, I mean yes, just..." I glanced around the empty conference room. "This is the spring-class graduation. Why is everyone else not here? How do you know my name?"

"I don't know much about the first question. I might be a fossil, but I could've sworn people cared about getting their shiny diplomas." She pointed at one of the screens at

the back of the room. “The second one’s easier. Your name shows up as the class valedictorian.”

It did indeed. There I was, on a screen, wearing the same forced smile that showed up in my academy ID, my name plain as day. It made me want to find a sewer manhole and jump inside.

“I’m not... I just have to give the speech. The top two ditched.”

“Top two and everyone else, apparently.” She made a show to look around the empty room. “Still, your scores are nothing to scoff at. Lots of potential in your future.”

I tried not to show the discomfort at the knowledge she had access to my academic profile. If this woman was just half as important as I’d been led to believe, then she still outranked anyone in middle-management. The doctor might as well be corporate royalty, getting some random student’s test scores would just take her a ping to some AI assistant. Heck, she might have been given a general-access AI of her own to save her the effort.

Would it be rude to ask again why she’d been added to the guest list at the last minute?

Probably. And I definitely fell into the “isn’t paid enough to know” category.

“Seems the ceremony might have been canceled.” Moreau shook her head. “We might as well leave.”

I tentatively assumed her use of ‘we’ had been of the royal variety. “I... can’t.” I grimaced, glancing over at the podium and then at the empty room. “I agreed to be the valedictorian.” More like I hadn’t been given the chance to refuse. “And it’s a bit early to make claims no one else’s going to show up.” That was a reason of my own. It’d be shitty to walk off only for some guy to show up late and think everyone else had left already. “I’m also in the exemplar program, so it’s not like no one would know.”

“Exemplar? Oh, you’ve got the...” She tapped the side of her head, to which I nodded. “That program’s shit from start to finish. The only thing it’s good for is to make people miserable and teach them how stupid a non-AGI AI can get.”

On that we agreed.

“I don’t have much I can comment on.” I shrugged, making a slight thumbs up gesture with my hand... outside my own line of sight.

Moreau noticed, chuckling. "Also a good teacher on how to skirt around technicalities, guess there is some use in the damn thing." She reached into her pockets, pulling out a colorful wrapper. "Coleslaw-dew?" The woman caught my grimace and grinned. "Not everyone enjoys the finer things in life." Something in my face must have been amusing because she chuckled.

"If I don't give a speech..."

"Just give me a minute, kid, you gave me an idea." The doctor waved me off.

I got a notification.

*\*Doctor Elvyra Moreau is transferring \$3,000 to your account\**

*\*Accept?\**

I choked on air and refused instantly. And just as quickly, Moreau frowned. "No need to be shy, that's barely pocket change. I'll be getting way more out of NexCorp for being here."

I believed her.

"I appreciate the offer, ma'am, but I can't," I said.

What was it with getting large sums of money getting thrown at my face for no apparent reason? Was this normal in the higher corporate circles where merely knowing the right person could get you a wad of cash or something?

"If it's about the exemplar-"

"No, it's not just that." I quickly shook my head. "I haven't earned it."

There were a lot of harsh lessons to be learned about taking money just because it was thrown your way. It very rarely ended well. Those years in the orphanage and living in a pod had taught some harsh lessons, I was fortunate many of them had been through second-hand experience.

"I can respect that, though it doesn't much change things." She cocked a smirk like she was about to fire a gun. "As I was going to say, I've got a task I'd want you to fulfill, and I'll compensate you fairly for it." Her hand made a gesture towards the empty podium. "As VIP, if I designate something as an emergency, it should trump any other engagements you have, no?"

"It... would certainly trump being a valedictorian and giving a speech."

Judging by how desperate the team-leader had been to shove me out of the factory floor, I was pretty certain Moreau could ask me to murder someone and the AI-reviewer would give me bonus points. Which was a concerning thing to think. I was a bit apprehensive this might lead down somewhere I wouldn't want it to.

"Though I'd have a few stipulations."

"Such as?" She quirked a brow.

"I'd like to wait a bit to confirm no one else's showing up," I said.

"Eh, sure."

Straightening myself out, I made sure to use my neuralink to start a recording. Though I didn't get any impression Doctor Moreau was a bad person, being careful cost me nothing and saved me from my fair share of scams. "What sort of work would you need?"

It took only a few seconds for my query to go through and for me to get a list of options. Removing distasteful options and job options that were well outside my capabilities, the list was emptied out, left devoid of any options. I tried to finagle around, but none of the filter iterations panned out. "There are no jobs I could take that'd be worth that much in a single day, let alone an afternoon."

Moreau's expression was a mix between incredulous and amused, her screen-eye flickered. "Bodyguard." She finally chimed in.

"What?"

"Bodyguard," Moreau repeated, tapping her cybernetic eye. "Non-scheduled urgent work for a VIP, and I'd be paying below market rate to account for your inexperience."

I hoped she didn't plan to go somewhere dangerous. Or worse. "Ma'am-"

"Evelyn, or Doctor Moreau," she waved me off.

"Doctor Moreau, I'm not qualified to be a bodyguard, I-"

"You've got a gun registered to your name, no?" Cocking her head, she gestured for me to follow. "Good enough for me."

I had a CD-22, also commonly known as a tickle-gun. It was meant to be enough to kill a G-class monster, a pest. The whole point of it was that it was unable to penetrate

through the baseline protective layer that modern clothes provided. It also happened to be in my backpack, which I'd not brought into the academy, for obvious reasons.

There was also the element of how this felt off, and yet... And yet this woman was still the first and last public figure who'd ever even acknowledged my father's sacrifice.

The fact that my bank account would be back in the red once I returned the emergency funds also helped.

"I... accept," I said tentatively. "Would a digital contract suffice or...?"

"Standard bodyguard gig, oral confirmation, digital recording." She shrugged, and I got pinged for a .vid file transfer. Might as well store a copy, then.

"I... accept." I made sure to speak plainly. I wanted to save a copy of everything that went down, but I didn't exactly have the best memory-storage options in my neuralink, so I lowered the recording quality as much as it would allow. Hopefully, that would last me the whole day or until this thing ended. "But I feel obligated to point out I'm-

"No worries." She snapped her fingers. "Now come along. I've got a few things I need to do." She put her hands on her hips and smirked. "I'll put a request to slot you into the clearance system."

I felt pity for whoever was about to be on the other end of that call. It had taken nearly a month for me to be get through everything when I'd joined the academy, no doubt to get higher access it would-

"And done," she said a second after.

I blinked.

Right, Moreau was a VIP.

I looked at her, Moreau's grin speaking volumes. "Just put a call in for a ride and some food; we'll be going to lab three." She sat down. "I asked it to take its time to get here. Thirty minutes sounds enough of a wait for you?"

Yeah... that was probably enough to confirm no one else would show up.

I posted a few comments on the class messaging board, but didn't get any responses. So I'd been about to settle in when I noticed a ping from Kali.

\*Ka45li: Speech.vid\*

\*Ka45li: Hope the real thing is better than this xD\*

It was a clip of my practicing the speech at the back of the storage area.

It took a lot of effort not to visibly groan.

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In a half-hour on the dot, the Air-Vehicle had landed at the academy rooftop. Just looking at it made my cash account shrivel up and die. Sleek silver and gold inlays, four jet thrusters, and a mirror finish. It was curved gently like an egg cut vertically and laid flat, yet the design screamed wealth. I'd only ever seen AVs this expensive flying near the skyscrapers in the city center, never this close.

It was probably the sort of AV they'd charge just for the privilege of looking at it.

"Hurry up, we don't have all day." Moreau hadn't even flinched as she stepped inside. "If you slow me down, I'll charge you for my time."

That got my feet moving to hurry inside. The interior featured fake leather, which was a bit too soft and cushy. I hugged my backpack close to my chest. There was a sense of... danger. No, not danger. It was a very strong sense of not belonging here, that at any moment I might say or do something that'd get me booted out.

Which wasn't too far off, the only reason why I was here at all was because... what? Moreau had had a bout of whimsy and generosity? Was this usual?

"Apple?"

I stared at the offered fruit, noting the waxy red sheen. I remembered some offhand factoid about how growing an actual fruit took ten times more water and herba-nutrients than making an equivalent flavored nutri-bar.

Also some story or another about apples and poison.

"I'm full." A half-lie, I'd eaten my 'complimentary' meal before coming over. Because I hadn't planned to do this on an empty stomach.

"Suit yourself." Moreau shrugged and took a bite.

The door closed with a gentle hiss, and the AV took off.

The ride was smoother than lying on a cloud and drifting down a river. The view out the window shifted as we pierced through low-city smog and rose high enough to stand above the lip of the walls that kept Frontier City 02 safe. Instantly, the scenery shifted, expanding all the way to the orange sunset on the horizon and the neon lights highlighting the skyscrapers up ahead. Though the city center bustled and pulsed with its own life, my eyes drifted towards the walls.

Gatling turrets jostled with flashes of muzzlefire, unleashing their munitions for a full second.

“E-class.” I whispered under my breath.

“What’s that?” Moreau quirked her brow.

“Two turrets, one second burst. E-class monster, non-armored type,” I said, pointing at the sentries atop the wall. “If it were an F-class it would’ve been one turret. If it were armored, then they would’ve used the 45-caliber.” As I said this, there were a series of short bursts from multiple turrets. “It was leading a horror of F-classes. If there are any G’s there, they’re left for the clean-up and munitions recovery crew to deal with.”

“You know your stuff, not surprising with those monster-warfare test scores.” She took another bite of the apple. “Are you looking for a logistics position?”

“No, not really.” I kept staring. “I’m going to join the city guard.”

Moreau choked, the chewing becoming a coughing fit. At a wave of her hand, one of the panels opened, and she pulled out a bottle of water, chugging it down. “You’re joking, right?” She accused me as soon as she put it back down.

“Why would you think that?”

“You’re a corpo academy graduate, and your scores are good enough you could get a grant and jump into a degree in some R&D field.” Her scowl deepened, waving at the wall. “Not throw your life away like-”

“Like a pod-sleeper orphan?” I finished for her. “I appreciate your concern, doctor. But I want to fight the monsters. I want to protect humanity.”

Moreau’s gaze darkened. “You plan on following your father’s footsteps, then.”

My shoulders squared off, my voice tensed, I met her gaze head-on. “Is that bad?”

The older woman didn’t answer, meeting my gaze with a serious expression. For a moment she looked like she’d been about to argue, but she turned to look away.

“Nothing bad about having a cause, kid.” She relented, sighing. “But if you want to help against the monsters, there are better ways. At least for someone with the right potential. Not that it matters, I guess, with your aunt...”

“My aunt?” I asked in confusion.

“The official story is that she died, right? That’s the cov-” Moreau tensed. “No, nothing, forget I said anything.” She hastily dismissed herself, chuckling nervously. “Got my wires crossed for a moment there. Was thinking of someone else.”

I wanted to make a comment, but wasn’t entirely certain if it would be the right move. I’d probably pushed back too hard with my earlier hard-headedness, so I opted to not pursue the subject directly.

But Moreau spoke before I could figure out an alternate approach. “Why join the academy if all you wanted was to become a guard?”

I snorted. “They bought off the position from the city-council five years ago, and they downsized, installing the auto-turrets. Their hiring practices have since changed and have bloated entry requirements.”

There was another reason for the takeover. The higher the monster classification, the less of it evaporated upon death. The parts left behind could be rather valuable depending on who you sold it to, and city guards had typically kept themselves financed through this method. NexCorp had likely taken over with the intention of cutting off the middleman.

“That’s incredibly stupid of them.” Moreau frowned. “Just one E-class electro-disruption type popping up at the wrong time could ruin everything.”

I nodded slightly, not wanting to make it too obvious I readily agreed with her opinion. I still had a handful of hours left after all. “There are also some issues regarding nest formation beyond the defensive perimeter. Drone overview can only do so much to spot them, and would be particularly inefficient against anything hiding underground.”

“Diggers are just the worst.” Moreau nodded. “Your best option is-”

“A resonance bomb.” I jumped at the opportunity, nodding enthusiastically. “The Marrow-B’s can be highly useful for this if you have the time to set up a proper detonation grid.”

The concept was quite elegant. If you placed an underground 3D minefield, and had exact control over the timing, you could effectively create a series of directional



shockwaves that would clash on one point. Anything lower than C-class would get turned to paste.

“Kid, Marrow-B’s marketing is built on a pipedream that worked one time.” She snorted. “Every other attempt to use it only gets a whole minefield wasted, with a pissed digger-type at the end of it. If the thing doesn’t stand exactly where it needs to be, or if the calculations are even slightly off, then it won’t work.”

I... really wanted to argue that point. But I quickly conceded this was one of those cases where the catalogs didn’t tell the whole story. “I guess you would have more experience in this.”

“You wanted to call bullshit, didn’t you?” She smirked.

“I do not know what you mean, Doctor Moreau,” I replied hastily, flustering a little and pointedly looking out the window as we approached the largest skyscraper in the city.

“Mhm.” Moreau chuckled. “If you wanted to kill monsters, why not mercenary work?”

I grumbled. “This is a monopoly city, so the only mercs here are enforcers. Not many monsters to fight.”

A moment of silence followed, Moreau kept looking at me in thought. “You said you want to save humans, kill monsters, all that, right?” She leaned over, staring at me with an amused grin. “Want to see the most powerful weapon ever made?”

I immediately perked up. Yes. So much yes. But I tempered myself before I could get too excited. “I... would appreciate the opportunity,” I said, carefully. “Would I be allowed to?”

“NexCorp has one on loan, not exactly super-secret.” The grin only grew. “Besides, not to toot my horn too hard, but I made the thing, I think I get to have a say on who I show off to.”