
[006]



With the disappearance of the pop-up, it was as if a veil had been lifted from my mind. The feverish half-dream vanished, I could think clearly again. Yet everything immediately stopped registering correctly. I blinked, each time finding the floor slightly further below. My mouth opened and closed, each time less familiar, less flat, protruding. My nostrils flared and they became inundated with scents like I'd never experienced before.

I should've panicked, but something in the air was demanding my attention. It was putrid, rotting, mixed with faint traces of smoke and iron. The E-class was about to breach containment, and it reeked of something foul. Something that had to be killed.

This monster had to be crushed before it could hurt anyone.

Power Mode (1):

**** -1 AP / Second ****

**** +5 Strength / Second ****

Several things happened at once, and I was prepared for none of them. The first was the pop-up that'd appeared at the center of my vision, demanding my attention, followed by at least a dozen others. Messages, numbers, a bar of some sort? Timers? A flood of text and weird notions that came with them.

I hastily swiped away at the screens, trying to get them all out of my vision.

My body was burning up, lava flowing through my veins. Everything was rising to a mild feverish pitch, and for a moment I could've sworn my breath came out as a fog.

"Axel! Get to the..." Moreau's scream slowed to shocked silence. The doctor was jacked into a port not too far off from the elevator, staring at me with wide, terrified eyes.

I scrambled to look behind me, and nearly screamed out as a blur of motion and rotors flew past me. Eight delivery drones barely missed me, barrelling directly towards the elevator, crashing into the nearly fully-broken cage. The monster roared as sparks, plastic, and smoke inundated the box. The wreckage compacted further as two more drones rammed directly into the pile, each one of them having kept their thrusters on, whirling and whining as they accelerated futilely.

I glanced at Moreau, the doctor's brow sweaty, her face pale and deeply focused, electronic screen shut off. Her biological eye kept shifting between the elevator and me, and then back towards the panic rooms.

The time for contemplation ended when the drone pileup exploded outwards in a flurry of red-hot blades and limbs headed straight at me.

I leapt backwards, trying to get away. I should've, maybe, stumbled a meter back. Instead, I found myself skidding across the floor a dozen meters away before I'd fully caught on.

Though I'd been left confused about what was going on, the monster seemed no less enthusiastic to kill me. It sped up, letting out a shrill roar. Its bladed tails whipped around wildly, leaving gouges in the walls and floor as it passed.

Scrambling to get back up, I froze as I caught sight of my hands. Large, wide, and with blackened claws, a patchwork of dark hair covered my forearms. They were still changing, too, muscles bulging out, wriggling, and rearranging themselves before compressing after a moment. Then, after a second, they would bulge out again, as if pumped with air, then smooth out and tighten. It was a rhythmic tension that spread throughout my body, lava through my veins, burning into every muscle within me.

The monster was upon me before I could regain my footing, it leapt, fangs first, maw open and full of glowing red-hot teeth. I panicked, raising my arm in an attempt to protect my face, even if it cost me my arm.

It bit down, its massive body dragging me further away from the elevator. I screamed, and began to punch at it wildly with my free arm.

Much to my surprise, when my fist met its skull, there was a loud, wet crack.

The monster's searing bite loosened, and it wobbled, just enough for me to pry my arm out and punch it again. Its blade-covered body was flung aside, smashing against and through one of the interior walls of the laboratory.

The moment of respite gave me enough time to look down at my wounded arm. The hellcat's fangs had burned perfectly black holes through my concerningly hairy forearm. There was no blood, the flesh in the injury had been burnt to a crisp, there was barely any pain either, perhaps a mix of adrenaline or maybe more to do that I couldn't feel or move anything beyond my elbow.

At a closer inspection, the muscles on my bicep were still doing that odd growth/compression thing, inch by inch working to reclaim the charred areas.

If I'd only been faster to react, then maybe I could've been able to avoid the hit.

Velocity Mode (2):

**** -2 AP / Second ****

**** -1 Strength / Second ****

**** +5 Speed / Second ****

I jolted. The fire in my veins had turned into electricity that rushed all the way from my feet and straight into my brain. My thoughts abruptly became clearer, sharper. At the same time, my muscles were stretching, then being drawn taut.

There was no time to focus on the sense of wrongness, however, as the hellcat had clambered its way through the hole. Its head was misshapen, one side slightly caved in, its right eye rendered entirely useless. The remaining eye looked at me warily, the monster baring its fangs and yowling at me, bladed glowing tails dancing behind it, the air above it shimmering from the heat.

Before I could consider what to do, the monster made its choice, pouncing at me. I ducked backward, flattening against the floor. The monster's tails whipped down at me, dancing red-hot blades missing but barely, the searing heat stung my face from its proximity.

Was it just me, or had the monster looked... slower?

No time to think; the instant the hellcat had landed, it pounced backwards, curling itself into a ball. The blades that littered its body flashed hotter, tails swinging and turning the monster into a ball of spinning death.

Not wanting to get my limbs chopped off, I lunged out of the way, nails digging into concrete and giving me enough purchase to yank myself. Perhaps too much purchase,

since my desperation ended up being enough to fling me through the wall on the opposite side of the corridor.

In a heap of limbs and a surprising lack of pain, I managed to jolt back up to my feet right away. I'd been just about ready to try and find somewhere to hide when a scream broke out behind me. I swiveled, spotting a man wearing a neon yellow jacket and a harness. It took me a moment to realize this was the AK01 sub-lab, the cylinder that had contained the weapon now completely encased in several layers of metal.

I immediately knew what was going on, it was on the very first page of the safety manual.

OSHA non-profit-loss guidance: In any location with a high-value asset, there must be a designated beacon.

The guy currently shaking in his shoes and whimpering was the beacon. I barely took half a step before he screamed again, hand slamming the red button on his chest. Instantly, the rope connecting him to the wall yanked, reeling the wailing guy there before coming to a complete stop.

According to the manual, there should've been an alcove there, one he'd get dragged into and safely tucked away behind a set of quickly-closing metal doors. It was the whole point of a beacon, to draw the monster away from the high-value asset, or in this case, the AK01.

Clearly, NexaSphere had not installed that alcove.

Now stuck to the wall, the man began to desperately attempt to remove the harness.

A crashing, rending sound behind me was all I needed to know the hellcat was already hot on my heels. I was fairly certain I could, potentially, leap over the dividers on to the next lab over.

But that would leave the beacon-guy as a meal.

I grit my teeth.

In what was surely a bout of stupidity and desperation, I ran towards the monster instead.

My heartbeat skyrocketed, and the second step I took came faster than the first, the third faster still. Every step took me further than it should have. The hellcat took one look at me and, for a split second, froze, probably as confused about why I'd charge at it as I was.

A wave of tightness and lightning coursed through my body, and I watched the monster as it made its choice, lunging at me with claws out. All six bladed tails flailed above and at its sides, making the prospect of punching it a painful one.

So I punted it.

It might not have been the smartest idea (I was human, that was an E-class monster), but at this point I didn't seem to have much else to lean on. Might as well pray that whatever insanity had let me punch the thing through a wall would let me do the same with a kick.

By all means, at best, it should've just sent the monster flying off back through where it came from.

Instead, the monster lashed out, racking its knives on my calf as it was thrown directly upwards. I screamed, pulling back and leaning into my good leg before I fell, the monster rolling in the air as if I'd just thrown it where it was meant to go to.

Glaring up, the hellcat now clung to the rafters, hissing a gurgling wet dying sound. Black blood oozed out between its lips, sizzling as it fell, evaporating before it could even reach the ground. The center of its chest was caved in, and if there'd been a heart in there, it would've been crushed by now. But like any other monster, it refused to go down easily.

We glared at one another.

It dropped towards me.

I rolled to the side, letting my bad leg go limp and ducking into myself, the sting of the monster's tail passed right where I'd been standing. Getting back on my good foot proved harder than I'd expected, my hand lashed out to grab anything I could for balance.

The monster pounced right as my fingers wrapped around the leg of a metal table. I flung it, tearing the table off of the ground.

The hellcat looked up at the incoming wall of steel with its good eye right before it came crashing down on its head.

CRUNCH

Panting, I glared at the limp body. The fiery blades flickered one last time before becoming dull and gray. It was dying, and I felt fortunate it had been as single-minded and borderline predictable as most other E-class monsters.

E-class monster "Hellcat" defeated!

Pick your Reward!

+10 AP / 'Prickly' / 'Heat'

The popup that took over the center of my vision nearly made me jump. I blinked at it and the sensation of... insistence that came from it. For a moment I hesitated. AP was that bar that was ticking down every second at the corner of my vision, which read "Adaptation Points" and was approaching "110/150" but what were the other two? I reached out to poke at 'Prickly'.

Instantly the hellcat's corpse began to sizzle violently, foul-smelling blackish fumes rose and swirled, refusing to let go as they... as I absorbed it. Somehow. I didn't fully comprehend the how's, but there was a definite sense of having taken something into myself.

Before I could ponder further, an itchiness spread throughout my body. I looked at my hands and noticed my nails darkening, sharpening, turning into claws. My hairy arps began to sprout quills, like I was some sort of porcupine.

'Prickly'

Oh.

A new popup appeared.

'Prickly'

Grade: [F] (temp)

True Grade: [G] [1 / 10]

Re-application cost: x10 AP

The technician's scream snapped me out of it. It seems the man had yet to find a way to escape the harness. Sighing, I approached, ignoring his whimpering shouts and thrashing against the restraints that should've kept him safe. I wasn't sure what was going on with me, but I wasn't going to let me just abandon someone.

“Don’t worry, I’m here to help,” is what I **would** have said if my mouth weren’t all wrong.

Instead, what came out was as if someone had taken one of those internet-modems from the previous millennium and were trying to drown it. A mix of chirps, snarls, clicks, and growls that almost made me wince.

At least the guy became very still.

Mostly because he passed out.

With an exasperated sigh (and ignoring a distinct smell from the dude’s pants), I tried to unlock the harness, but my fingers were a bit too meaty for the job. Actually, I was almost twice the size I should’ve been. I’d probably panic about this later, but right now wasn’t the time, so after a few seconds fiddling, I just chose to see whether I could cut it with my new threatening-looking nails.

It was concerningly easy.

Very careful not to harm the guy, I lifted him with my good... claw? And, limping, dragged him towards the entrance of the panic room. The doors were closed, of course, but if I dropped him there, then someone would take care of him, right? I gave the camera a shy wave.

Turning towards the elevator, I winced as fresh pain blossomed from my right arm. I looked down at it in shock. The injury was starting to heal. With every pulse of my muscles stretching and going taut, the blackened flesh was looking just a bit less charred. I even started feeling the tip of my fingers a little.

Making my way back to the elevator, I stopped at the sight of Doctor Moreau, barely a dozen meters away or so. There was a haunted look in her eyes as she stared at me.

“Are you still Axel?” She asked, and I noticed she stood within the threshold of the elevator. “Nod or shake your head.”

I nodded.

She didn’t look relieved.

“Fuck.” Moreau cursed under her breath, low enough I shouldn’t have been able to hear, but I very much did. “You killed the monster.” She wasn’t asking a question, but I nodded anyway. “But not the human.” Again, not a question, but I vigorously shook my head.

Moreau frowned.

“Break a quill off and toss it over.”

I... didn't know how to answer to that, but after a moment obliged. The quill splintered off, and after a second I tossed it over, watching it roll to a stop. Moreau didn't make a move for it, but she kept eyeing it. "Fascinating." She finally declared, glancing back up at me. "Are you trans?"

What? Bewildered, I shook my head.

She blinked. "Are you **sure**?"

I frowned, then shook my head vehemently. What was this woman on about?

"I guess it makes sense... you're too poor for gene-editing." She mused.

I wasn't entirely sure whether to feel insulted or not. But tried to keep from showing it. I had hoped that she might know what was going on. For the most part, I was certain that the only thing keeping my calm was just how unbelievable all of this was.

"That means you're not a meguca either..." She leaned away a little, crossing her arms. I noticed her finger had been lingering on the panic button throughout the whole conversation. "What the fuck are you?"

"*You did this to me!*" I tried to tell her, placing my hands next to one another.

The cube.

This was the cube's fault!

Moreau grimaced, visibly shuddering. "Don't... try to talk, that was painful to hear. You meant the... cube?" At my nod, she shook her head. "That old thing couldn't have done this to you. It's a phase-trap. It's... it traps things that are phased. A phased monster steps through, it gets a cube's worth of flesh cut off."

I snapped at her, letting out a snarl.

Her finger instantly returned to the panic button.

With a huff, I raised both of my arms over, trying to show I didn't want to hurt her. Though, she probably did deserve someone punching her face in after this whole mess she'd gotten me into.

"I don't know what's going on either, Axel." Moreau's tone strained between apologetic and stressed. She glanced at the elevator panel. "Whatever the case, this has to wait. I blocked out the feeds, but according to chatter, a meguca is on her way."

I shrugged.

Why would that be a bad thing?

Moreau looked at me incredulously, then gestured at my body.

I glanced down.

Ah.

Right.

I kinda looked like a monster.

Well shit.

As if to mock me, a new popup dinged into view.

Achievement: Reach +200 Adaptive Speed

Unlocked: Twitch Muscles

Reaction speed is halved.

Adaptive Speed at 200! Cap reached!

I had a bad feeling I was going to need this.