
[011]

The world was warmth and light, a soft floating cloud that opened to an infinite sunny blue overhead and a refreshingly clear breeze. It took a moment to realize I was dreaming, this had to be a dream. There was no way I'd woken up without alarms, buzzing, ads, or tight confining pod-space.

It took a minute to realize I ought to start waking up properly. With a flicker of thought, I sent the command for my pod to slide me out.

Nothing happened.

Grumbling, I reached up to the manual-open button and... found nothing. Just my arm stretching up and up and not encountering anything in its way. A warm breeze blew over me. To my left there was nothing but rocky plains and the odd splotch of green.

I was... outside?

...

That... couldn't be right. Beyond the walls was...

I was in the badlands.

In a fit of panic, I jolted, sitting up and reaching for my gun. Only finding empty pockets. My eyes darted all around me, trying to find the nearest threat. The badlands were infested by monsters, if I didn't-

"Easy there. Nearest D-class is a kilometer south." Moreau's voice called out. "These parts are pretty empty."

Despite her attempt at reassurances, I couldn't help but notice she was currently sitting in the shade of the AV and within running distance of the door.

Last night... Moreau had shown up with her AV to pick me up right before sunrise. I'd barely managed to insist she pick up what little stuff I had left back at my home before passing out entirely.

“You’ve been out of it for about a day.” Her attention had remained on a device in her hands. She was poking at it with a smart-pen of some sort, checking the readings every other minute.

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The math checked out. “Why am I not inside the AV?” I asked.

“Never leave anything you’re not willing to lose near a sleeping meguca.” She waved her own words away. “You were having nightmares. Not exactly unusual without the neuralink’s suppression systems.”

“The... what now?”

“All neuralink have some basic quality of life functions baked in. Night terror suppression, cooling against wet-bulb weather, basic filtering, and a few others. Stuff to keep your brain up, running, and productive.” She explained. “It’s been standard practice since the 21-hundred, though the better models let you tweak things around.” Moreau poked her temple. “Haven’t needed more than thirty minutes of sleep every week for nearly forty years now.”

I suppressed the immediate question of what her actual age was, and instead moved on to what really mattered. “Should I be worried?”

Moreau glanced at me for a moment, then made a gesture at a black piece of metal sitting atop a small table. “Mind picking that up and tossing it into that bucket over there? I think it’s been in the sun long enough.”

Slightly confused by the request, noting the chunk of metal had been coated in that fancy hyper-black paint that made things look like silhouettes. It was uncomfortably warm to the touch so it couldn’t have been out here for more than a minute, but other than that, I couldn’t see anything particularly interesting about it. “What’s this for?”

“Small experiment.”

Shrugging, I dunked it into the bucket. Steam exploded on contact, metal hissing angrily. I jumped back with a yelp, nearly taking a full three feet into the air before crashing back down.

“What was that for!?”

Moreau chuckled. "Did it hurt?"

I frowned at that, no, it hadn't. A quick check confirmed no injuries either. "What if I'd burnt myself?"

She cracked a smirk. "We have ointment for that."

The frown deepened. "Are you going to shoot me to see whether I'm bulletproof?"

"I'll be following the golden rules of meguca testing." She raised a single digit. "Never do or say anything a meguca might take as a threat. Never make assumptions within earshot. And never try to create an explanation for a meguca's powers."

"I get one and two, but what about three?"

"Explaining a meguca their powers can only end up in one of three scenarios." She raised three fingers up. "One, you're right and nothing happens. Two, you missed, but they believe you anyway, being left with a faulty understanding of their own abilities." Two went down, only leaving the middle-finger. "Three, and worse of the possibilities, the meguca proves you wrong within minutes."

"I'm not a meguca." I tapped my chest. "The system confirmed as much."

The doctor twitched and went very still, looking at me with a dangerous glint in her eyes. "I am not going to let you tempt me like that."

"What?"

"Gravis taunted me with rule three, it's a lesson I was too proud to learn."

I rolled my eyes. "And you're not overly proud now, I assume."

"There are some ground rules we should put down." She ignored my barb, putting down the piece of electronics she'd been poking and focusing on me. "How much do you know about megucas?"

"What comes through the feeds and what's in the history books."

"Do you know what a scrubber is?"

"Obviously." I scoffed, crossing my arms. "They're the AI moderation systems. They're mostly there to remove content-policy violations."

"Not quite all they do." Moreau nodded. "Details about megucas are within scrubber purview. They are what helps sustain a megucas anonymity, but also to prevent normal folk from learning how they work."

“The second one seems... I’m guessing it’s also to protect them?” I frowned. “Like keeping weapon details classified to prevent someone from trying to design a counter?”

“For the most part? Yes. But it also makes it easier for corporations to recruit megucas. If they have information the meguca might want or need, then that becomes a bargaining chip.” She looked firmly at me. “As of right now, the things you’ve said and the things you’ve shown are very similar to how a meguca operates. However, and this is the line, I will not tell you about those details. I will keep what I know intentionally vague wherever possible.”

“What? Why?”

“Golden trio.” She shrugged. “For all we know, the fundamentals of what you are work differently. You’ve said so yourself, your ‘system’ acknowledged you are not a meguca.” She raised her finger. “I will say this, however: Most megucas have a system, a screen and popups that show numbers and letters. But some megucas have a literal voice instead.”

“Why would that be inconsistent?”

“Third golden rule.”

I scowled. “There has to be an explanation.”

“Not saying to not figure it out, but if you do find an answer, then you’d be the first in the past two centuries.” She shook her head. “Everyone who claims they’ve ‘cracked’ how megucas or monsters work or are formed, should be thrown out the nearest window.”

“That... seems a bit harsh.”

Moreau let out a scoff. “The scientific community is plagued by those bastards trying to sell snake-oil. It’s a bunch of buzzwords and theories that can never be proven or disproven, only tweaked and revised. They’re worse than monsters, at least the monsters provide something useful from dying, like data or materials.”

Her words reminded me of the strange vision I’d had while in the lab. “What about the red sun and the three moons?”

She visibly twitched. “I will not be tempted into the vile ways of pseudoscience. You have no way to prove that’s not some sort of collective hallucination.” The doctor practically jumped off of her chair.

I jumped a little. “What do you mean ‘collective hallucination’?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It does.”

“Nope.” She quickly shook her head. “Not without anything more concrete. Which leads into rule two. Everything I learn about you will go public at some point or another.”

“Uh...”

She pointed her finger at me, as if in accusation. “Be it a year from now or ten through some automated message-delivery service. What I learn will go public.”

“I thought high-corpos couldn’t die of old age.” I glanced at her graying hair. Now that I thought about it, I had never heard of a high-corporo growing old or dying from natural causes. It was a well known fact that the current director of Neomata-inc was over a hundred years old, and the guy still looked like he was in his twenties.

“Not the point.” She snapped, but I noticed a slight tension on her shoulders that wasn’t there before. “I won’t be making the same mistake humanity went through.”

“What mistake?”

“The first meguca in the history books was not, in fact, the first meguca. It’s one of those uncomfortable truths people don’t like to talk about.” Moreau frowned. “The first cataclysm could’ve been avoided if people just hadn’t been so...” With a sigh, she shook her head. “Look, ten years is your limit.”

I squirmed a little. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable about that.”

“I don’t care.” She shook her head. “What if others like you start to pop up? What if every other ‘Axel’ gets shot because no one understands what they are? Even if you’re the only case in the world, the data could still prove invaluable to someone else’s research. For all we know, it could be the key to the next Moreau’s AK-01.”

That was a lot of ego to unpack. “Or it could do nothing.”

“Or it could help create the best coleslaw-flavored popcorn in history.”

“No patient doctor confidentiality?” I wasn’t entirely against her logic, but that didn’t mean I liked it. Or her, for that matter.

“I’m not that kind of doctor... Well, I am, but it’s more like a veterinarian. The sort that pokes at monsters with sharp things. We could arrange that sort of thing, get you strapped to a table... ready to get poked...” She flashed me a smile of all teeth and vindication. “If you’d prefer, that is.”

I shuddered, shaking my head. “No, thank you.” Getting vivisected was not something I wanted to experience.

“In that case, then let’s put down the basics of our arrangement.” She reached into her pocket, pulling out a very familiar looking quill. “If and when you transform, bring me samples. Some blood, hair, fur, feathers, scales, whatever. I’d like to keep track of your progress. In exchange, I will help you.”

That sounded more up my speed, I nodded. “And what would that help entail?”

The doctor chuckled. “In its plainest form? Money. But it mostly depends on what you want or need. I might be persona-non-grata in New Francisco, but I’ve got plenty of contacts that don’t care about something like that.” Twiddling her fingers in the air, she turned towards the AV. “I suppose the question is what do you want, mister Axel Garcia?”

That was the big question, wasn’t it?

I’d spent several hours thinking about it before I’d agreed to come to New Francisco with the doctor. “I want to help people. It’s clear I won’t be able to do that in Frontier City, so…”

A figure walked over from the side of the AV. I recognized him, Bob. The beard and pot belly hadn’t changed any, but he was now wearing the sleek green crashsuit of a pilot. “With an outlook like that, New Francisco’s gonna chew you up like gum and spit you to the curb,” he said as he cleaned his hands with a rag. “There’s no city guard in NF, there are only gangs and mercs and the corpo armies. You don’t look like someone who’d join any of those.”

“Mercenary feels like the best option, to be honest.” I quickly nodded. “I read that NF’s constantly under attack from monsters, so…”

Moreau and Bob shared a glance. The doctor was the first to speak. “I think we can arrange something, the Gutter Saints still owe me a few favors.”

Bob shot her a look. “You can’t be serious.”

“What? The boy wants to kill monsters, he’ll fit right in.”

I was starting to regret my choices already. “I… never heard of the Gutter Saints.”

Moreau cackled. “They’re a mercenary group, you’ll love them. But before we can even think about that, we need to do a few things.” She pointed at a metal box that’d been propped up next to the AV’s door. “Take that and start running around.”

“...is it a bomb?”

“No, just dead weight.” Bob answered. “You need to get a better idea of what your body’s capable of.” He stroked his beard in thought. “And I think we’ll test that aim.”

Looking around the wasteland that surrounded us, I hesitated. “Does it have to be here?”

The doctor grinned. “Where else could you find readily-available live targets?”