

“Please come back again.” Despite the impassivity of the AI’s tone, I could’ve sworn there was a snarky edge mixed in. I glared back at the 24/7 auto-clothes shop and grumbled, no less happy than the AI had been. I was wearing a set of sweats and shoes, the cheapest items in the catalog. And it’d still cost twice as much as my academy uniform.

“Now, how the hell do I get home?”

Looking around to orient myself, I pinged my neuralink trying to get some directions... and after a second of silence, remembered that my neuralink was currently in my pocket. With a tiny curse at myself, I walked to the right and continued down second-street.

This was the really “pricey” part of the city, which I didn’t know my way around. I figured once I found a tram-stop, I’d be able to orient myself properly. Currently, I didn’t trust myself to find my way without directions, as the exhaustion from earlier had redoubled, and I was practically dragging my feet. That my thoughts were clouded with everything that had just transpired didn’t help any, either.

That postponed existential crisis was surging like a meal that didn’t want to stay down.

I... was a meguca? A male variant, at least according to the random crazy woman. One that took the appearance of a monster.

That was a lot to unwrap.

A flashing screen and a female voice caught my gaze. It was an ad with a very familiar flowing red sand. It swirled around before revealing a hand-cream, presented right next to... not Kali. The face was similar but not quite, tweaked a thousand ways to make it prettier... harder to recognize.

I frowned.

Kali was meguca Sahara, her face was on the largest billboard on second-street. She should have enough money to buy out a whole mega-building. Why run a simple dollar-store in the industrial district?

She was a meguca, and those had whole religions built around them. Some of the more extreme practitioners even unironically claimed they were Goddesses. I'd never seen the sense in all of that, but I'd need to be blind and stupid not to acknowledge megucas were severely important. Without megucas, humanity wouldn't have survived this long.

It wasn't my place to make claims, but it just felt... wrong.

AP: 1/150

The tiny meter remained in the corner of my eye. It, alongside with my neuralink currently in my pocket, made it impossible to deny what had happened the past couple hours.

Was that why I felt troubled?

I looked at the giant screen and tried to imagine my face on it. "Axel" or some other name plastered over the image of some video-game or toy. I quickly got back to walking. Yeah, I was definitely no meguca material. Obvious physiological differences aside, it just didn't feel right.

My thoughts were halted as I caught a whiff of something.

Inhaling deeply, I was slightly surprised at how much I was able to pick out. There were a dozen different food stands and restaurants within my immediate vicinity, and I could easily distinguish between them. I could even recognize the faintest hint of ozone that was coming out of a few of the buzzing signposts. It should've been overwhelming, but my attention narrowed down to a singular foul thing.

It tugged at me, demanding my attention.

Following it, I stepped out of second-street and into the hundreds of non-vehicle streets leading into it. All around me, the people kept on walking, barely paying me any mind. I moved with determined steps, exhaustion completely forgotten.

It took longer than I'd expected, losing the trail here and there, moving through areas I wasn't familiar with didn't help either. Eventually I found myself looking down at one of the supply-alleyways, drones flying in and out overhead as they took out packages to deliver elsewhere in the district. Trash occupied both sides of the street, the lights flickered under the buzzing of the drones.

I instinctively sought my CD-22, and cursed.

I'd left the gun in the academy's security lockers.

The scent of rot had grown stronger, pungent and insistent, demanding my attention. Walking forward, I kept my eyes peeled.

Then, one of the trashbags burst out.

SKREEEAAAAGH

SPLAT

I blinked at my hand. It was covered in green, sizzling goop.

Actually, everything was covered in goop. Monster blood.

The creature had jumped out at me and I'd just... slapped it before I could think.

It'd just exploded like a water balloon filled with guts and tiny bones.

G-class monster "Mouthier" defeated!

+2 AP

"Oh God, some of it got into my mouth." I gagged, spitting as much of the horrid thing as possible, watching as the whole of the monster violently evaporated, turning into even worse smelling steam.

As soon as it had cleared, I was left feeling slightly less shitty than a minute ago and with my head a little clearer.

AP: 3/150

"Ok, pause on that one moment." I muttered, beginning to head back. "I just slapped a G-class into paste."

G-class was the weakest type, and they were weak enough even a .22 bullet could handle one. But slapping? I'd never heard of such a thing as being able to just splatter a

monster no matter how weak. Was I stronger? I definitely was stronger than this morning.

A pop-up immediately appeared to answer my question.

Axel Garcia (□□□□□□)

Base Form:

AP: 3/150

Strength: 5

Speed: 5

Durability: 5

Cocking my head at it, I frowned. “Why just three stats?” It was the very first question that popped up. “Shouldn’t there be more? What about my sense of smell? That feels... decidedly better than it was before.”

The text warped right before my eyes, shifting and rearranging itself after half a second.

Axel Garcia (□□□□□□)

Base Form:

AP: 3/150

+Strength: 5

+Speed: 5

+Durability: 5

+Senses: 5

└ *Smell:* 5

I tried to scrutinize the weird menu, and found that each of the categories could open into a set of smaller ones. Speed could open to “reaction time”, and it opened even further to categorize parts of my body and what was being applied where. But none of it made much sense, it was “5” on everything, a default? I couldn’t make heads or tails of it, even less when apparently none of the values could be changed.

Also, what was up with the blank squares? And “Base Form”?

“Definitely should say ‘human’.” I muttered.

The text rattled angrily at me.

I jumped back, a little surprised at the feeling of *wrongness* that’d washed through me. “I’m human.” I declared at the box of text only I could see. “I’m not a meguca, I’m a guy.”

This time the text gave off a vague sense of agreement.

This had to be the strangest interaction I’d ever experienced. The text hadn’t changed, but it was as if I could understand some hidden meaning behind the numbers. A meaning that came with intent. Like reading the words of a friend through toneless text, yet knowing what they actually meant.

“What are you anyway? You were that weird prompt, right? The fever? And...” And nothing was happening. It was ignoring the question or maybe it couldn’t answer? I don’t think I could stare down an unblinking text-field. “Shouldn’t you have more fields? Wisdom, Luck, Intelligence, Charisma, or something?”

I got another little rattle, this one chock-full of amusement. A sneer.

Annoyed, I was about to wave off the pop-up, but stopped. If this thing had emotions, maybe I should at least try to establish some sort of amicable interaction. “I’m not sure what happened back at the lab, or why, but... I don’t think I would’ve survived the monster without your help. Thanks.”

The menu shifted, and a new stat joined the others.

Charisma: -1

“Oh fudge you.” I waved at the text, making it vanish. “I bet you caused that whole mess. The monster started doing weird shit the moment it saw me.”

Monsters just didn’t start to spontaneously become stronger like that. If such a thing were possible, then a lot of the manuals on engagement protocols would need to be rewritten from the ground up. There was no response from the menu, and I was of half a mind to consider it an admission of guilt through omission.

“Can you just... go to someone else?” I asked. “I was supposed to join the guard, not... this.” With nothing happening, I sighed. “What do you even want?”

G-class monster “Mouthier” defeated!
+2 AP

The pop-up had come back, larger than before, insistent, shoving itself against my nose. I waved it away.

“I’ll think about it.”

My petulance hid a slight relief. Whatever this was, it wanted monsters dead, and at least I could agree on that. The fact that my sense of smell had been the one to draw me here was slightly concerning though. Did I have in-built monster-detection or something? I very much preferred having a firearm between myself and the monster rather than be in a situation where I’d need to slap them into chunky salsa.

...I should start being more mindful with my new strength.

“If I don’t kill monsters, then AP won’t go up, meaning... I don’t transform? There’s got to be a limit on how many degrees of separation there can be. Maybe if I’m a drone operator then-”

Passive: +0.25 AP / hour

“That’s... a point every four hours, so about...” Doing maths without a literal calculator inside my skull took a smidge longer than I’d expected. “A month to fill out?” I frowned. “Unless I kill monsters. Why weren’t there any options like with the hellcat?”

G-class pest “Mouthier” defeated!
+2 AP

“That answers that, I guess.” This thing had an attitude. “Fudge. No, wait, **fuck.**” I suppressed the slight sense of wrongness that came from swearing. My neuralink was literally in my pocket, no longer seeing through my eyes or hearing through my ears.

My steps slowed down to a stop, right as I’d reached second-street again.

I’d been thinking about how to make my life click back into place, to return to what I’d been working for over the past few years. But there was still the issue of Terry and the tampering he’d done to my profile. Without removing those false notes, I’d be blocked from... anything. Everything. I doubt even my current employer would’ve hired me if they’d known some corpo had branded me.

It was time to fix that.

With determined steps, I renewed my search for the nearest tram station. But when I found it, I wasn’t looking for the quickest way back to my megabuilding. Instead, I mapped out the quickest route towards the NexCorp academy. For a moment I considered going to the dollar-store, but Kali was most likely not there, not when there was still a “teleporter-type monster” on the loose.

And I wasn’t sure what I’d tell her. “Hey, I’m the monster you were trying to kill an hour ago” ?

Scoffing at the idea, I just marched on, keeping my eyes up to the rooftops of the nearby buildings. There were only a handful of skyscrapers in this part of the city, so it was easier to keep myself oriented by using them as landmarks. It took longer than I’d willingly confess (navigating the city without the neuralink was... a trip. At least there were no cyber-ads hanging over every corner), but eventually I found the place I’d been looking for.

The twenty-odd story building was not much different to any other in this part of the city. A large, intricate set of pieces of glass and metal, slotted together to make the building an easily defensible position. It was the standard; this way, the city could still protect itself even if there was a breach.

What made it stand out was the blaring music and flashing lights at the very top. The techno-AI-third-gen-ultra-pop was blaring out at a volume I was sure was against regulation. But then again, who’d care? The “Clarke” name was plastered on its side like it’d been branded into the metal. And that was what mattered, the whole building was owned by the Clarke family. As far as Terry’s boasting had gone, the name “could be traced back to before the first annihilation,” though what really mattered was that they were middle-management for a major-league corporation.

In Frontier City 02, they might as well have called themselves royalty.

The whole building was Terry's domain.

Gritting my teeth, I marched forward.

It was time to have a talk.