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## [022]

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Having reached the motel (in a hurry, and having been looking over my shoulder every other step of the way even though I knew no one could recognize me as the “Shush Monster”), I very hastily settled down into my room to follow Moreau’s instructions directly.

“Sit down and listen very carefully, Axel, because this message deletes itself as it plays out, so it can’t be rewound either. Pause if you’re not inside your motel room.” An AI representation of Moreau’s face looked up at me from the tablet screen. This fake Moreau had both biological eyes, and the video was several hours long, so it was impossible she could’ve recorded this herself. “There will be many instances where I physically cannot tell you *why* I’m telling you to do something, trust me on this one. Let’s just say that some NDA’s enforce themselves. So pay close attention and be sure to take notes.”

I took a long gulp from my water bottle, pausing the video to confirm the motel room was closed, the chair was up against the handle, and I couldn’t hear anyone or anything nearby. Briefly I wondered if the NDA Moreau was talking about was some sort of restriction AI or, perhaps, a meguca power. Seeing the doctor’s proficiency with technology, I was betting on the latter of the two.

Either that, or Moreau didn’t want to get rid of that “enforcer” for some reason.

I clicked for the vid to continue.

“Based on our interactions, I’ll assume you know exactly nothing about the internet. Now, to understand the concept, the internet is...”

Oh, this was going to take a while.

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“...Which takes us to servers. Now, there are many communication protocols that...”

I was taking notes, trying to keep everything she'd been talking about. The clock read two hours had passed, the vid said there were two more remaining. I could've sworn the video length had originally been just three hours.

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"...by using ant hives' hormone messaging system as the inspiration, we created the foundational structure for how intra-city communications are established. It also happens to be how the internet could be segmented into layers the way it did. Of course, corporations took advantage of that pretty quickly, which brings us to..."

It'd been another hour, the video still had two hours left.

Something definitely fucky going on. But it wasn't as if she was bullshitting me, this information felt useful, so it was probably worth learning it?

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"...to summarize, the way I've set you up is that you can use your tablet as if you are your own isolated city." The slide-show came to an end. "All you have to do is interact with things normally, upload the interactions into a data-shard, and upload that into the internet. The data will be sent with your profile certification, and make a pull request, which will be ready for upload the next time you plug in."

I... blinked, staring at the screen with a blank expression.

It still indicated there were two hours left.

"Since you only accelerated the video rather than skip parts, I will count this as having finished your punishment. Had you tried to circumvent this, I would've held your messages hostage." The AI-image Moreau retracted her pointer stick. "I also hope you've come to appreciate the genius of my four-minute-long solution to your otherwise incredibly inane problem. Who knows? Maybe you'll retain some of the wisdom I've imparted onto you." She cackled. "Now we can move on to actual precautions you will need to take moving forward."

I hit pause and turned off the tablet.

Rubbing my eyes, I stood up, walked over to the bed, and just laid down.

I'd just spent five hours getting a lecture on how the "modern" internet worked.

As punishment. Maybe letting her strangle me would've been better, her arms were kind of noodly after all.

It'd been too long a day, and my brain was chock-full of what'd essentially boiled down to a condensed digital communications course.

Future Axel could handle the stuff.

Time to get some shut-eye.

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\*Kalima: How did the graduation go? Speech as adorkable as you practiced it?\*

\*Kalima: I saw clips of you at Terry's party. What's the story there?\*

\*Kalima: test\*

\*Kalima: Are you still offline?\*

\*Kalima: So, hey, I was on my way back home the other night and saw you getting picked up by this really fancy looking AV... anything interesting happen?\*

I glanced at Kali's messages and felt a pit in my stomach. Every other message and notification I'd gotten had been superficial. Missed payment here, missed hours there, some infraction for walking in trash-only areas... Oh, and about a thousand social-media notifications, almost all of them involving me being tagged in one thing or another at Terry's party. Also, a few hundred friend requests, all of which were flagged as bots.

All but one.

*Ultra-premium user MA-Sahara has sent you a priority private message:*

\*MA-Sahara: Mister Axel Garcia, I am meguca Sahara, I was on-site during the monster attack. I saw you in NexCorp tower with a VIP called Evelyn Moreau. That individual you were with is incredibly dangerous. Please contact me as soon as you receive this message\*

## *Accept friend request?*

Based on the time-stamps, she'd tried to contact me normally first before she'd sent the message as the meguca just last night. It'd been almost a week since I'd left. What was I supposed to do here? Tell her I knew she was Kali the dollar-store cashier and a meguca?

I should've probably watched Moreau's video, but the notification ding had been right there, and I'd wanted to check-up on things. So I'd kept the clip paused and gone through everything else first.

Now faced with Kali's messages, I was left hesitating.

With a deep breath, I began to type a response, pretending I didn't know anything. That felt wrong on several levels, so I tried again, this time calling her out. On a read-over, it had too much indignation. Third time around, I focused on apologizing and trying to tell her I was doing ok. Fourth time was just trying to explain that I'd come to New Francisco because I'd felt like it would be impossible to become a guard in FC02.

None of them felt right.

Maybe it was because none of them mentioned what was truly going on with me, or anything about Moreau for that matter. I didn't need a long lecture about privacy to know that anything and everything I sent would get scrutinized. Perhaps before I would've had some semblance of privacy because I was a nobody, but that was no longer the case. NexCorp should've connected the dots of who'd been helping Moreau steal from them by now, Kali's "Sahara" message confirmed as much.

Fortunately, I had time to think.

My tablet wasn't connected to the internet, not directly. According to Moreau, its internet access worked more like a slow package delivery service. I'd upload things into the datashard, then use the shard to have those things moved into my tablet, and then my responses would go from my tablet, into the shard, and then into the internet (once the shard was plugged into a terminal).

Putting the tablet down and rubbing my temples, I decided to take a walk and clear my head. Being stuffed up in the room was doing me no good.

Getting a fresh change of clothes, I marched out.

“Good morning, Axel Garcia!” the droid called out after me. “Beware that we have hotbox weather today!”

I waved back, hiding the grimace. Going out on a run with a hot-bulb-day forecast was not exactly the healthiest choice (more like it'd be suicidal for the average human). The heat was somewhat less of a problem back in Frontier City, not that it wasn't hot, but mostly that it wasn't as humid. So it was easier to tolerate with enough water (and constant sweating). But hot-bulb days were a lot more dangerous, the constant high humidity made it impossible to cool off without jumping indoors or dropping into a cold shower every hour or so.

Stepping out into the streets, the morning sun already felt like it was bite-y, the air was hot against my skin, and the humidity high enough my clothes immediately clung to my body. But I was barely feeling it any more than as a mild warmth. If there was one thing to celebrate about my new form, it was that I appeared to have a far higher tolerance for heat.

Still, better to do things cautiously and get back before noon.

The jog started nice enough, the streets were empty of pedestrians but not vehicles. Everyone with a car had brought it out, and they were all locked and fresh with their AC units blasting off at maximum. Which also meant just about everywhere was having a massive traffic jam, likely spanning the whole district.

Taking the chance to familiarize myself with the area, I took plenty of detours, fishing for little shops and points of convenience that might come useful. The best places to buy things were always those hole-in-the-wall vending machines that were stocked by some barely known corporation. Those were always the best because they were still in the “desperate to make a name for themselves” phase, so there was some concern over quality rather than being entirely focused on optimizing production costs.

The other reason why I'd taken to meandering around as much as I could was to take in the street-art that covered just about every wall in the district.

At first, there didn't seem to be much rhyme or reason. Some places were a collage of hastily scribbled signatures stamped on top of one another until they were entirely illegible. Other places had big murals depicting some scene or concept, most of them remaining untouched by the lesser “tags”, yet some getting slowly eroded away by other large pieces.

But as I looked at it from the lens of it being territorial markings, it started to click together. Most of the pieces were there as indicators of who was in charge. The places

that had the most overlapping graffiti were those that remained under dispute, and though it looked like there were a lot of gangs, all of them showed unifying thematics in their art.

Rodents with halos.

Meaning it was one large gang controlling the territory, with it getting several smaller “subgroups” competing against one another for their own districts. Near and around the motel there were three of those as far as I could tell. One had skeletal flaming rats with halos, the second had mice using the halo as a reticle for a bazooka, and the third had a toga-wearing rat holding a halo another smaller rat was using as a running-wheel.

I had a strong suspicion these were connected to the “Sewer Saints” Moreau had been talking about. Whether that was the name for the overarching gang or one of the smaller ones was questionable, though.

Using the very colorful gang-art as a way to more accurately remember the layout of the district, I was also enjoying the sheer number of shops and buildings that had their own little “street art” at the front. It was like an ad, except that every storefront was a unique conglomeration of colors, concepts, and words. Not like how back home you could get the same ad a hundred times over on every corner and street.

It was refreshing. Well, refreshing despite what I was guessing was a cool spring 40°C (104°F) heat. The capacity to almost ignore the blistering sun was one perk I wasn't going to complain about.

I'd been into my second hour of jogging when I chose to start making my way back to the motel. And it was at around this time that I caught a very faint buzzing sound. Though I'd thought it was just the normal squeak of air-conditioning units kicking into gear, the buzzing had been persistent and practically unchanging. And as I made my way around between the taller buildings, the buzzing moved to fix itself directly overhead.

Yet looking up, there was nothing, just the smog and blazing sun.

I changed course, removing my shirt and wrapping it around my head so it would serve as an improvised head-cover as well as eyepatch over my right eye. I headed towards a lesser storm-drain I'd spotted earlier, now fully certain that I was being followed.

The drain was a large empty concrete cylinder barely large enough for me to stand, and not a dozen steps inside things quickly became dark. It was then that I removed the shirt from my head, uncovered my eye and turned towards the entrance with my Bulstra

drawn. It was a little trick I'd learned from working in an irregularly lit factory building: If you keep an eye closed while in a bright place, then it will be pre-adjusted to darkness.

The buzzing had followed, approaching the storm-drain's mouth.

Then I saw the drone's shadow, because no projection-based cloaking could replicate literal sunlight.

It moved closer to the drain, and for a split second I considered whether this was the right thing to do. I was being followed, but... was that all? The moment I pulled the trigger meant things could escalate. What if this was some sort of neighborhood watch or just the police force keeping an eye on things? What if this was just some brat playing around with their new toy? Had they done anything wrong?

Also, was I willing to bet 45\$ this was necessary violence? Because that was how much each bullet cost.

I hesitated, and slowly placed my finger into the trigger-guard though I didn't lower the barrel. I'd let the stranger decide if this was necessary or not, waiting for the drone to get closer to the storm-drain. There was a shimmer in the air as it moved from being directly under sunlight into the shadows of the tunnel, becoming fully invisible after a second.

Yet the buzzing stopped moving entirely.

"I know you're there. I'll shoot if you move any closer." I warned.

There was no response, no movement.

"You have until the count of three. One." I cocked the hammer. "Two."

A speaker crackled into life, a distorted voice speaking up. "We are the Sewer Saints, we were sent by a mutual acquaintance that would rather stay anonymous."

My brows furrowed, finger moving back to the trigger.

"Did this acquaintance happen to have a message?"

"Green Eyeballs."

That was the passcode, I sighed in relief, lowering the revolver and carefully uncocking it. It'd been exactly at this moment that I caught the faint pneumatic hiss and a blurr. The next moment, I was staring down at a fist-sized gray goopy lump stuck to my chest.

Panic was immediately replaced by pain, an electric shock running through my whole body with the force of a sledgehammer.

I toppled over, knees giving out, free hand reaching for the goop and ripping it out. My hand clenched from the shock, and the goop exploded in every direction.

With the electric charge now mostly dissipated, I took aim with my other arm.

“Wai-”

BANG

The drone came into view in a rain of sparks.

My ears exploded from the sound.

Head ringing like a bell, I got back up and wobbled over to the drone as I holstered the gun.

The drone had been the size of my torso, and the .507 bullet from my Bulstra had turned its right flank into a gaping sparking wound. I glared down at its camera as it rotated to look up at me. The stealth systems were flicking on and off, the whole thing was twitching, madly attempting to regain functionality.

“This is mine now,” I said to the camera. Then proceeded to find and remove the battery. The thing was leaking all over the place and clearly would not make it.

With my new prize in tow, I made my way back to the motel.

Though not before quickly fishing for the pieces of the .507 bullet and debris. I’d definitely get some scrap-value out of this.