

I woke to the sound of gunfire, or to be more precise, of gunfire happening *nearby*. My ears were still abuzz with the echoes of a shotgun blast as I'd jumped out of the bed, Bulstra in hand.

The room was dark, no movement. Holding my breath, I waited, using the bed as cover as I kept my attention towards the door.

A full five minutes of silence followed before I fumbled around to turn on the light and put my shoes on. Everything inside the room had been as I'd left it, so I carefully removed the chair from the door and peeked outside. No movement, no other people, only a faint scent of mildew.

I waited another minute, straining my hearing to try and pick up anything, but there was only silence. Gun in hand, and shouldering my backpack in case I needed to make a run for it, I slunk towards the stairs, checking my angles and making my way down to the lobby. The scent of gunpowder warned me I was on the right track, but the lack of sounds was somehow more unnerving.

The android stood behind the desk, staring blankly ahead.

"Hello?" I called out.

Her head spun without her body moving an inch, metallic skull and soulless black camera eyes locking on to me. "Can I help you?" She asked with a voice that crackled through the voicebox inside her mouth cavity.

"I heard a gun going off."

The robot tried to nod, though with her head now looking backwards, it came stilted and clumsy. "I did not hear gunfire." She stated. "I was cleaning."

Frowning slightly, I sniffed again, it did smell of gunpowder, and there was also a lingering scent of sweat. But looking around the lobby, I couldn't see any bullet holes nor anything broken. "I... see." I hesitated for a moment, then chose to drop the matter. "I noticed the room was spotless, did you clean it?"

Another awkward nod. “Yes, I am in charge of cleaning!” There was a slight excited squawk in the voice that distorted into a jumble of static.

“Uhm... thanks. I’ve never been anywhere that was as... clean...” Maybe the NexCorp lab? Though they probably had teams of bots for that. “Anyway, I was wondering if there’s someplace nearby where I could use a terminal to access the internet?”

The question brought another whirring of squeaky fans as the robot then gave another awkward backward nod. “Certainly! There is a remote-access internet-shop just twelve blocks down the street, right after the sex-android rental house!”

The idea of full androids was made a whole lot less exciting when presented like that. “...thanks.”

“Have a great day, Axel Garcia!” She called out, then silently followed me with those camera-eyes as I walked towards the entrance.

With an awkward wave, I stepped outside and out into the sunny morning. The streets were pleasantly empty, and any people awake at this hour were either hurrying off or dragging their feet back to their homes.

I let out a breath of relief.

That’d been... something.

Stressful, definitely stressful, and strange.

Droids being erratic was nothing new, it was what happened once their hardware started to break down. I’d heard a fair share of horror stories about where this “degradation” might lead, but the only cases that ever made it to the news streams typically involved someone physically getting in the way of a bot that had lost their ability to process their surroundings.

The shotgun was concerning, though.

I didn’t know what kind of “cleaning” involved firearms, or how it guaranteed the rooms looked so spotless, but I wasn’t going to try figuring it out either. Fortunately, this was just a droid rather than a person with deprecated cybernetics and no way to upgrade. Now THAT would be terrifying. An infected neuralink couldn’t take over, even if your body was fully cybernetic, but it could certainly drive you mad if left unchecked.

Like an alarm-clock being reprogrammed to go off randomly every couple hours.

Shuddering, I shook my head, trying to physically dispel the nightmare. “Focus on what you need to do, today’s going to be a good day.” I spoke the words out to redirect my train of thought. “First order of business, internet.”

If yesterday had taught me anything, it was that the lack of internet connection was crippling. It was borderline impossible to navigate the city without some form of map-tracker, and it also made finding anything much more complicated than it needed to be. Had I checked on possible gun-shop locations, I could’ve avoided the mugging entirely.

That, and I also needed to check up on my accounts.

As abruptly as I’d left Frontier City 02, I couldn’t just “abandon” it. I had people there that would be worried sick about my disappearance! I should definitely at least tell them I was still alive and breathing.

...well not everyone.

If my boss found out I was in breach of contract, he’d likely issue a sanction. It was probably a very good thing that the tablet didn’t have an internet connection, otherwise the cash I had in reserve would be automatically drawn to pay the fine. Maybe I could paint it as “the VIP” having ordered me to come-with? Definitely going to put that into the draft.

Deep in thought, kept a healthy distance from the solicitor sexroids (it was still kind of baffling to think animatronics were a common thing here) and stepped into the “Internet away from Internet” store, a television in the lobby blaring off with 24/7 news. I noticed there was no clerk, only a screen that asked for what room I wanted to use and for how long. It asked for a 2K downpayment it would give back upon exit (a robbery), but other than that, the rates were cheaper than I’d expected.

I rented the room for a solid two hours.

Surely this couldn’t need more time than that, right?

Right?

The room was sound-proof, with a comfy chair and a large touch-screen. The whole touch-screen thing was... annoying, but I’d gotten a little used to it from using the tablet Moreau had given me. So I boot up, navigate around, try to access my accounts, wade my way through the barrage of ads and...

*Please use neuralink account to verify remote login.*

My eyes widened in dawning horror.

“Oh... Oh no.”

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“WHY. WON'T. YOU. **WORK!**?” I cried in a mix of rage and despair.

“Sir, I’m afraid if your tone rises any further, I will be obligated to end the call.” The service operator stated calmly through the terminal’s interface.

Glaring at the screen, I grit my teeth. “Sorry.” I told the AI, clenching my fists hard enough my hands were shaking. “I did everything you told me to. The neuralink produced the proper identification codes, the time-sensitive access token, and the four BIOS keys. And the terminal stopped reading the data-shard.”

“Then it must mean the user is dead and you are attempting to loot his account.”

“No!” I barely held back from shouting. “Please, please, **please** remember the very first thing we did was verify I am alive. The reason I’m having this call is because my neuralink broke. Could you escalate this to a human supervisor?”

There was a pause. “I am sorry, but there are none available, sir. Have a good day!”

The call ended.

A mandatory questionnaire for customer satisfaction popped up, covering the whole of the screen.

Ten calls.

Eight hours.

Not a lick of progress.

My hands were shaking, blood boiling, ears ringing, jaw clenched, breathing heavily, and eyes boring holes into the touch-screen. The temptation to give the owners something to do with the down payment rose steadily.

Then I noticed my clothes felt... tight. And that an almost innocuous little pop-up had shifted closer to my line of sight, carrying with it a siren song.

For a moment, I'd nearly dismissed it.

But something else bubbled up within me.

"Fudge it. You want to kill monsters? Let's kill go some monsters."

The notification rattled with excitement as I took to the terminal again, this time with a new purpose. An almost manic energy overtook me as I began to open up any and all local call-outs and warnings regarding monster presences... and how to get to those places.

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The bus screeched to a stop and I jumped off, ignoring how everyone had given me a wide berth. Maybe it was the gun on my hip, maybe that I was definitely a few centimeters taller than when I'd gotten into the bus, or maybe it was just my expression. I was having trouble focusing, there was a growing non-physical itchiness that'd become harder to ignore with every passing minute.

It was a sneeze teetering at the edge but never fully realizing, going away after a minute but coming back with a vengeance.

I barely registered the name of the stop, or the bus-line. I'd asked how to get to my destination and that was exactly where I was going.

This was one of the four main industrial districts outside the third wall, the smog was thick, the air rancid with the acrid scent of burning rubber. But several of the companies had put out automatic bounties for a multitude of monster sightings, this was the likeliest place I would encounter one.

The other advantage was that it was noon, there wasn't a single soul on the street. Who would be? There was no reason to come here other than for work, and workers would be smack in the middle of their shifts.

Yet, as I walked from one street to the next, I realized the enormity of the task at hand.

“I can’t kill monsters if I can’t find them.” I growled, with no proper direction, I might as well be blind.

A wave of something sharp and floral coursed through me.

***Tracking Mode (1):***

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

***\* +5 Senses / Second \****

All of a sudden, there was a wave of relief that began to form at the top of my head. “Now’s not the right time! Wa...it?”

My mind exploded with a shower of sensation. It was as if someone had switched the graphic settings to the world, except it was more than just visual. I could hear my own heartbeat, I could smell the faint chemical traces emanating from the various factories. And it was growing sharper, more defined.

The air became vibrant with colors, scents becoming more than just a flat passive perception but a layer of colors.

Then I heard the crackling of bone and stretching of muscles, and realized my face was starting to change, my clothes were audibly straining as well.

“No!”

I stopped the process, barely five seconds in, the world now defined in a shower of sensation I could’ve never even thought possible. In a panic, I pulled out a shirt from my backpack and wrapped it around my head as I began to run, trying to contain the changes before they could take over.

It was as if I’d been carrying a tray of cans and one had fallen off. I could no more put it back without risking every other can falling than I could delay the wobble from becoming a total collapse.

Now running at a dead sprint, I found the faintest trace of absolute foulness and latched on to it like a heat-guided missile. I was running hard enough my shoes were creaking in complaint, backpack snuggled against my chest just to keep it from rattling so hard it broke something. Someone called out to me from one of the buildings, I ignored the

shout, running harder, grip slipping on my focus, the transformation continuing in a stutter, the creak of clothes turning into a steady ripping sound.

At some point I'd made it into the older part of the district, the scent leading me straight to what, at a glance, looked like an abandoned factory building. I didn't even bother to look for an entrance, I clambered over the fence and only realized how easy it'd been after I was on the other side.

The foulness had grown, almost cloying at my throat, and I was no longer able to hold back.

Dropping the backpack next to the rusted remains of some metal bins, I pulled out the Bulstra and shot the lock out of the nearest door leading to the interior of the building, shoving my way inside.

No longer able to hold back any longer, I let it go, restarting the process, allowing it to take over as I tore off what parts of my clothes weren't already beyond saving.

***Tracking Mode (2):***

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

***\* +4 Senses / Second \****

In just a handful of seconds, I could make out each individual scent of each monster within the building. I could sense their sickness, their claws scratching at the ground as they rushed in my direction, attracted by the sound, begging to be killed. None of their scents or sounds ***felt*** threatening like the Hellcat had been, bolstering my confidence.

The anger, frustration, and release all rushed together into a rush. But as my mind came down from the little bubble of stress that'd just popped, I frowned at the popup. ***+4?***

***Tracking Mode (2):***

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

***\* -1 Senses / Second \****

***\* +5 Senses / Second \****

Thinking back to the lab, when the “mode” had switched to the “(2)” it’d also been drawing away from the stat that’d been previously bolstered. It felt like the system didn’t like switching modes, increasing the cost each time. But also drawing from whatever I’d developed the previous time. Was it to incentivise doubling down on one thing rather than spreading out?

*Charisma:*                    0    ->    +1

I stared at the new pop-up in surprise.

I tried to speak up. “Do I get anything out of that?” Instead, what came was the usual garbled mess. I pushed the thought aside, this wasn’t the time.

It was time to-

BANG

My ears folded back, the sound almost painful despite that it’d come far deeper within the factory.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one that had come to kill monsters.