

Chapter 105 - Dolor

PoV: Jade

Carrying Ela toward Misha's Emporium alongside the Guard Captain, Jade couldn't help but be struck by how deceptive the girl's frame truly was.

She felt surprisingly light—far lighter than someone with the amount of Cybernetics Ela presumably had should be—but there was also a density and heft to her that spoke of raw muscle, coiled strength hidden beneath her battered exterior.

'I really thought she'd be damn near immovable, considering all the augments she's probably rocking... but no. She's way too light for that. And yet, she's way tougher than I gave her credit for as well... Makes sense now how she carried Misha earlier like it was nothing.'

Her thoughts were running on autopilot, a swirling mess of fragmented impressions and frantic distractions that kept her from succumbing to the knot of panic twisting in her chest.

The sound of Ela's shallow, rattling breaths to her left wasn't helping one bit.

The sheer amount of blood the girl was losing was impossible to ignore, the dark stains seeping into Jade's clothes with every step they took.

Her mind kept circling back to the same haunting memory: Ela's desperate, defiant words hurled at Carinola Valir, her broken body somehow forcing itself to act in an attempt to shield Jade.

Again and again, the scene replayed in Jade's head—the sight of Ela staring death in the face, unflinching, all to buy her a slim, almost laughable chance of survival.

And Jade? She hadn't done anything.

She'd just laid there, *terrified*, utterly paralyzed by fear.

'I can't believe she put herself out there like that... for me. She was ready to die just to buy me a few more seconds, that I was clearly not going to use for anything...'

Jade's heart twisted painfully as the realization settled deeper.

She'd spent weeks trying to figure out the enigma that was Ela, constantly second-guessing the girl's intentions and motivations. Ela had always been a mystery—about as easy to read as a weather-beaten book from the post-NetBurn era: Faded, fragmented, and damn near impossible to decipher.

And yet... This act of reckless selflessness spoke volumes.

'Is she really that worried about Vega's retaliation if something happens to me? Is that why she'd put herself on the line like that?' She immediately shook her head at that thought, 'No,

*that doesn't make sense... She's never seemed like someone who's afraid of Vega, even when he was being particularly... **Vega.***

The thought refused to let go, gnawing at the edges of her mind until a far more unsettling question began to surface.

*'What if it's not about Vega? What if she... **actually** cares?'*

The idea sent an odd, unsteady feeling through her, and before she could stop herself, another question hit her like a punch to the gut:

*'What do **I** think of **her**?'*

She wasn't sure if she even wanted to answer that.

After all, the whole reason she was here—why she'd even met Ela in the first place—was because Vega had sent her to spy on the girl.

That had been her mission. Her job.

But now?

It didn't feel like that anymore.

Somewhere along the line, things had shifted, and Jade couldn't pinpoint exactly where the line between duty and something more had blurred—or when.

The time she had spent with Ela had been... well, to put it lightly, *chaotic*.

Strange, terrifying, often dangerous to degrees she'd never expected—but, if she were being honest, also some of the most alive she'd felt in her entire life.

Training with Vega and the Sisters had always been structured, controlled.

Sure, it was intense, but there had always been safety nets in place—layers of protection that ensured things never truly went off the rails. It was like being raised in a fortress, shielded from the real, visceral messiness of the world beyond.

But being with Ela? That was the polar opposite.

There were no safety nets, no comforting assurances that everything would turn out okay.

Every moment felt like teetering on the edge of a knife, one wrong step away from catastrophe. Yet, somehow, having Ela around had made it feel... *manageable*.

Even if Vega didn't see it that way, to Jade, Ela felt like a safety net in herself.

A chaotic, unpredictable, blade-wielding safety net, but a safety net nonetheless.

'I was so scared of her at first,' Jade thought, glancing down at Ela's pale, bloodied face, slumped against her side. Seeing her like this made her seem all the more human—a vulnerability that Jade couldn't deny she had occasionally wondered about.

From the outside, Ela often felt almost superhuman—the feats she was capable of, the sheer determination, the willingness to put herself on the line in ways that Jade could hardly comprehend. It was like she wasn't even real sometimes.

And yet, seeing her like this, fragile and broken, reminded Jade that Ela did have limits.

And unlike Jade, Ela didn't seem to have anyone to catch her when she hit them.

There was no Vega, no Ruby, no Sapphira acting as a buffer between her and the cold, hard edges of the world. From everything Jade could tell, Ela was on her own.

Sure, Ela had people like Misha, Mr. Shori, and a handful of others she seemed to trust to some extent, but none of them seemed to share the kind of bond Jade had with the Sisters and Vega. They weren't there to protect her, to guide her, to ensure that she didn't carry the weight of everything alone.

It hit Jade then, in a way it hadn't before: Ela wasn't just surviving; she was surviving entirely on her own terms. And somehow, through all of that, she still had the capacity to put her life on the line for someone else.

For *her*.

That thought lingered heavily in Jade's chest, weighing her down like lead as they finally reached the steps in front of Misha's Emporium.

The Guard Captain shifted Ela's limp body slightly, trying to position her so he could access the door—but before he could make another move, the entrance wooshed open on its own, and Misha practically exploded out, her long limbs flailing as she dragged all three of them inside with an urgency that left no room for argument.

"Fast, quick! Go!" Misha barked, her usually vibrant tone now erratic and clipped.

Her eyes, those crystalline ruby orbs, locked onto Ela's bloodied, broken body, darting across her form with a frenzied intensity like searchlights scanning for fugitives.

Then, suddenly, they changed.

The rounded facets of her ruby eyes sharpened and reshaped, shifting into a triangular trillion-cut. When her gaze snapped to Jade, it carried the weight of something ancient and otherworldly, and her voice—*oh, her voice*—sent shivers down Jade's spine.

"Why is Misha's friend nearly *dead*, Jade?" The words came out in a tone that was half-standard, half-Grypik, each syllable undercut by a low, vibrating trill that practically hissed with fury. "*Why* is Jade fine, but Misha's *friend* is not?!"

Her green teeth bared in a grotesque snarl, and her usually expressive face twisted into something straight out of a nightmare. It took everything Jade had not to freeze in place, but the Guard Captain kept them moving, carrying Ela toward where Misha was leading them.

Jade swallowed hard, her throat tight, but she managed to find her voice. “I... Jade messed up. *Badly*. Ela covered for Jade and got hurt... Jade is very sorry...”

The words came out shaky but honest, her guilt spilling over into every syllable.

Keeping her tone humble and phrased in the Gryplik way was harder than she'd expected, especially with Misha's terrifying glare boring into her.

“The Golden Phoenix's enforcers were closer than we thought,” Jade continued, her voice barely above a whisper. “We couldn't escape them... Misha's equipment saved our lives; Ela would be thankful to Misha. Jade is too, of course.”

Misha didn't respond immediately.

She had flung open a door Jade hadn't even realized was there, hidden behind the register.

Beyond it was a surprisingly spacious living area, cluttered with electronics, textiles, tools, and heaps of other odds and ends.

Without missing a beat, Misha's elongated arms swept across the singular table in the center of the room, sending everything on it crashing to the floor in a chaotic cacophony.

“Put Ela there. *Now!*” Misha commanded, her tone brooking no argument, before disappearing through another door in a blur of movement.

Jade and the Guard Captain carefully laid Ela down on the now-cleared table.

Jade gasped as she started gently pulling away the shredded remnants of Ela's clothing, her hands trembling as the full extent of the damage came into view.

“*That* doesn't look good,” the Guard Captain muttered, his voice grim as he surveyed the injuries. “I've seen a lot of wounds in my time, and these... I hope your friend makes it, girl. Truly.”

Jade couldn't bring herself to respond beyond a quiet, “Thanks, me too.”

Her eyes remained glued to Ela's battered form.

Blood seeped from deep gashes that seemed to cover every inch of her body, pooling beneath her in stark contrast to her ashen skin.

The worst, though, was her chest. Even with the tattered remains of her shirt and pullover still covering parts of her torso, it was obvious that her ribcage was a mangled, bloody mess.

Jade felt a knot of anger twist in her gut as she stared at the damage.

‘Fucking Valir... I swear we'll kill her for this, Ela...’

It was a miracle Ela was still alive. Seeing her like this—broken, battered, but still hanging on—filled Jade with equal parts awe and rage.

Whatever it took, whatever she had to do, Jade wasn't about to let Ela's fight end here.

Her hands trembled as she started fumbling with the remnants of Ela's clothing, trying to tear the sturdy fabric into makeshift bandages. But it quickly became apparent that even in its shredded, blood-soaked state, the material was far too strong to tear by hand.

"Damn it!" Jade hissed under her breath, yanking out her vibroknife. The blade hummed faintly as she began cutting through the tough material with frantic energy, shredding what remained of Ela's outfit into strips.

She worked quickly as she tried to prioritize the worst of the injuries.

Blood was pooling around Ela at an alarming rate, and Jade stuffed the makeshift bandages into the gaping wounds that were bleeding the most or wrapped them around the wounds when the location allowed for it, applying as much pressure as she could manage.

Her hands were already slick with blood, and it was all she could do to keep herself from slipping into full-blown panic.

"I really wish I could help," the Guard Captain said from the side, his voice tinged with genuine regret. "But I'm not allowed to do anything more than bring her here... I'm really sorry."

Jade glanced up at him briefly, her expression tight and desperate.

She wanted to lash out, to demand why he wouldn't break the rules just this once, but she held her tongue. It wasn't his fault, and deep down, she knew he was already bending the rules by even bringing them here. Floor Guards were only supposed to bring them to the place of employment or, in Ela's case, place of lending; not inside.

"Just... just stay out of the way," she muttered, her voice cracking under the strain of trying to keep it together. She focused back on Ela, stuffing another strip of fabric into a particularly deep gash on her side and pressing down hard enough to make her hands ache.

Jade's heart pounded as she glanced down at Ela's pale face. Her breathing was shallow, each rattling breath sounding like it was being dragged out of her by sheer force of will.

The sight sent a pang of fear slicing through Jade's chest.

'Come on, Ela. Don't give up on me now...'

The whirlwind that was Misha stormed back into the room clutching an armful of injectors filled with liquids of various colors.

Her eyes locked onto Ela's limp and battered form, and for a moment, she froze.

The usually chaotic and confident Gryplik was suddenly still, her expression frozen in something that resembled shock—or maybe even fear.

“Misha!” Jade’s voice cracked through the tension like a whip.

Misha jolted, blinking rapidly as if shaking herself awake from a nightmare.

Without another word, she moved to the table, her arms a blur as she laid out the injectors in a haphazard line. There were at least a dozen of them, all in varying shapes and sizes, with labels written in everything from standard to languages Jade didn’t even recognize.

“Misha... Misha doesn’t know what is safe for humans,” the Gryplik admitted, her voice unusually restrained, though it still carried a frantic edge. “Misha has these in stock for... customers. But Misha never asks what they are used for! Misha cannot make this decision for Ela.”

Her crystal-like eyes darted from Jade to the injectors and back again, her triangular pupils glinting with desperation. “Choose, *quickly*. The Ripper is on the way, but it will take a few minutes! Misha has already called.”

Jade’s heart sank as she stared at the bewildering array of injectors.

She snatched up the nearest one and frantically scanned the label, but it was no use—she barely had any experience with auto-injectors, let alone ones meant for emergency triage.

Some were labeled with terms she vaguely recognized, while others were completely alien, their contents glowing faintly through translucent casings. Her fingers trembled as she grabbed another, flipping it over to check for anything remotely familiar.

“I don’t know what any of this shit even is!” she muttered, panic creeping into her voice as she shuffled through the injectors. “Why does Misha even have these if Misha doesn’t know what they’re for?!”

“Misha sells them. That is all!” the Gryplik snapped back. “Misha keeps stock, Misha does not study them! Misha is merchant, not Ripper!”

As Jade’s panic mounted, Misha whirled on the Guard Captain, who had been standing awkwardly by the door, his expression a mix of guilt and unease. “If Captain will not help, Captain *must* leave. Misha does not need useless people standing around. *Out!*”

The Captain hesitated for a moment, as if considering arguing, but one look at Misha’s fearsome glare was enough to make him back down.

He muttered something under his breath about protocols and swiftly exited the room, leaving Jade and Misha alone with Ela’s fragile, bloodied body.

Jade’s gaze snapped back to the injectors.

“I don’t even know where to fucking start,” she whispered, though she kept flipping through them, desperate to find something—*anything*—that might help.

Misha's hands fidgeted nervously as she hovered over Jade, her elongated fingers twitching toward the injectors but never quite touching them. "*Choose*, Jade. Misha cannot lose Ela. Misha... Misha *cannot*."

Jade's hands trembled as she continued to rifle through the injectors.

Each label she scanned felt like another dead end.

Words written in languages she didn't understand, dosages that made no sense, and chemical names that meant nothing to her—all of it blurred together in a haze of panic.

She grabbed one after the other, her heart sinking further with every failed attempt.

"Come on, come on," she muttered, her voice shaking as she tossed aside yet another injector she couldn't make sense of.

Finally, her eyes locked onto a word she recognized: "**Epinephrine.**"

Her lips moved silently as she mouthed the word, a memory flickering to life in the back of her mind.

Sapphira's voice, calm and methodical, echoed faintly through the haze of her thoughts.

It had been one of those rare moments when Sapphira had decided to share some of her medical knowledge, giving Jade a rundown on what to do if someone in their group fell unconscious in the middle of a mission.

"Epinephrine," Jade muttered, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her heart.

She flipped the injector over and scanned the rest of the label. "10mg auto-injector dosage."

The number sparked something else—a vague, half-formed memory.

Sapphira had mentioned dosages during that same conversation, though the details were fuzzy. Jade bit her lip, trying to pull the fragments together.

'*1-2mg, max... And only 3mg for Emira. No more than that,*' she remembered Sapphira saying, her tone firm and insistent.

The realization hit Jade like a punch to the gut. "Shit," she whispered under her breath.

Turning to Misha, who was practically vibrating with tension, Jade held up the injector. "Misha, who buys this? Are they borged-out or not?"

Misha's triangular pupils sharpened as her answer came fast and precise, as though she had a mental catalog of every transaction she'd ever made. "Yes! Borg—massive borg. Very large, very heavy. That one is for them. Only them."

Jade cursed again, louder this time, and tossed the injector back onto the table.

"Too much. Way too much," she muttered, shaking her head. "That'll fucking kill her."

Her hands dove back into the pile, her fingers trembling as she searched for another option.

The injectors blurred together in her vision, the foreign words and cryptic labels taunting her at every turn. Finally, she found another possibility.

“**EnduraSynth**,” she read aloud, her voice tinged with desperation. Her eyes scanned the rest of the label, and this time, she felt a flicker of hope. The dosage information was clear and precise, listing recommendations for different ages, sizes, and weights.

“At least this one’s not a fucking guessing game,” Jade muttered, grabbing it firmly.

She glanced at Misha. “This one disables pain signals. It’s not perfect, but it’s *something*. We’ll use this while we wait for the Ripper... Not that Ela can really feel much right now, but it’s better than nothing...”

Misha nodded sharply. “Do it!”

Jade didn’t hesitate.

Popping the cap off the auto-injector, she jammed it into Ela’s neck, watching as the liquid was pumped into her system. She held her breath, waiting for any sign that it might make even the slightest difference.

But deep down, the doubts gnawed at her.

‘There’s not really anything I can do here, is there? The fucking painkiller isn’t going to save her; what the hell am I even doing?’ Her eyes darted frantically around the room, searching for anything—anything—that might help.

But all she saw were tools, supplies, and blood pooling beneath the table. *‘Just trying to stop the bleeding with scraps of cloth isn’t going to cut it either...’*

Her gaze flickered over the discarded **Epinephrine** injector, and an idea sparked in her mind.

A reckless, dangerous idea—but one that might actually work.

‘Maybe Ela has something up her sleeve... An implant, a hidden injector—anything. If I can just get her awake for a moment, she might be able to fix the most pressing issue herself—or at least help me figure out which of these fucking injectors won’t straight up kill her outright...’

The memory of Ela patching up those Golden Phoenix goons flashed in her mind—her sharp focus, her steady hands, her clear understanding of what to do.

‘She knows way more about first-aid than me. God, we should’ve just let those assholes bleed out...!’ Jade cursed herself under her breath as she snatched the Epinephrine injector off the table, turning it over in her hands to study the label more carefully.

'Okay, 10mg total. If I stop it before it gets past... what? Ten? Twenty percent? That should be safe, right? Just enough to shock her awake...'

The plan wasn't just risky—it was outright stupid.

But as Jade glanced back at Ela's ashen face, the steady stream of blood seeping through the makeshift bandages, she knew there wasn't time to second-guess herself.

The Ripper was on their way, sure, but the way things were going, they'd arrive just in time to strip Ela's cybernetics for resale.

Her jaw clenched, and her fingers tightened around the injector. *'This has to work... It has to.'*

She looked to Misha, who was pacing anxiously in the corner, her eyes never straying far from Ela. "Misha, if this doesn't work—"

"Misha does not want to hear *'if.'* Jade *must* fix Misha's friend. *Now.*"

Jade took a shaky breath, her fingers ice-cold as she positioned the injector. "Here goes nothing..."

She jammed the auto-injector into Ela's neck, her eyes glued to the liquid inside. She tried to keep her trembling hands steady, determined to stop the injection before it went too far.

But her stomach dropped into a bottomless abyss as the liquid shot into Ela's bloodstream far faster than the EnduraSynth one had.

"No, no, no...!" she muttered in panic, watching helplessly as the indicator passed the 50% mark before she finally managed to rip the injector out and toss it across the room, the metal clattering loudly against the wall.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" The words poured out in an endless, panicked mantra as she stared at Ela's pale, lifeless form.

Her mind spiraled. *'That was way too fucking much...! That was way more than 3mg—what the hell was I thinking?! That's the absolute maximum Sapphira said for Emira, and Ela's nowhere near that size! Oh fuck, I just killed her... I just fucking killed her!'*

Tears streamed down her face as the weight of what she'd done came crashing down on her. After everything Ela had done to protect her, after risking her life again and again... Jade had just sealed her fate.

She slumped forward, choking on a sob, her hands hovering uselessly over Ela's still frame.

But then, out of nowhere, Ela's body jolted violently.

Her chest heaved as she broke into a coughing fit, spewing blood as her eyes fluttered open.

The sound was like a lightning bolt through Jade's mind, momentarily snapping her out of her despair.

“Ela!” she exclaimed, her voice trembling with equal parts relief and panic. “Oh fuck, Ela, you’re awake—holy shit—wait—”

Ela’s hazy eyes barely focused on her, and Jade quickly tried to get her bearings, forcing herself to stay functional. “Okay, uh—listen, Ela, you’re bleeding out, like, *really* bad. I—I don’t know what to do. I tried, but—look—these injectors.”

She frantically pointed at the chaotic collection of vials and devices scattered next to Ela. “Do you know any of these? Do any of these help? Please, tell me you know something, *anything!*”

Ela’s head shifted weakly, her lips pale and her voice so faint that Jade had to strain to hear it. “No... no idea about... injectors.”

Jade’s chest tightened again, despair surging back full force. Her shoulders slumped as she buried her face in her hands, her tears dripping onto the bloodied table.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Ela,” she whispered, her voice cracking. “I just... I panicked, and I used the wrong thing, and I poisoned you. I *killed* you, after everything you did for me. I—I don’t know what to do...”

Ela’s eyes widened slightly, despite the haze of pain and exhaustion clouding her expression.

“Poison...? And bleeding...” she murmured, barely audible.

Jade hesitated, then nodded, fumbling for words. “I—it was an Epinephrine injector, but it—”

Ela weakly raised a hand, cutting her off mid-sentence.

She coughed again, blood flecking her lips, before muttering a single word that made no sense to Jade but somehow felt significant. “Serenity...”

Then, Ela closed her eyes and her breathing turned even shallower and less pronounced.

“Ela? Ela, no—stay with me! *Please!*” Jade’s voice cracked as panic gripped her. She grabbed Ela’s limp hand, squeezing it like it would somehow keep the girl tethered to reality.

“You can’t just say some cryptic shit and die on me! What the fuck does that even mean?!”

Jade’s breathing was erratic, her chest rising and falling in short bursts.

Tears blurred her vision as she clenched her fists against the table. “Goddammit! I—I’m sorry, okay?! I’m fucking sorry! You didn’t deserve this, you didn’t deserve any of it! You should’ve left me out there to die instead of throwing your life away for someone like me!”

Nearby, Misha was pacing like a cornered animal, her elongated fingers twitching uncontrollably.

“Misha *will not* let this happen!” she suddenly announced, her voice more shrill than Jade had ever heard it. Without another word, Misha bolted out of the room, her rapid steps echoing through the Emporium as she called out for the Ripper.

Jade barely registered it, too consumed by her spiraling despair. Her mind raced in circles, every thought leading back to one unavoidable conclusion: *Ela was dying, and it was all her fault.*

She slumped forward, pressing her forehead to the blood-slick table as tears streamed freely down her cheeks.

“I killed you,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “I fucking killed you. You were the only one who treated me like I was worth anything. Not a stupid little sister to babysit, not a pet to coddle—an equal. A *friend*...” Her voice broke, and she sobbed harder, her shoulders shaking violently.

Minutes passed like hours, the oppressive silence broken only by Jade’s muffled sobs and the faint drip, drip, drip of blood hitting the floor. It was a sound that had become disturbingly constant, and yet it only made the dread in her chest worse with every passing second.

Until it stopped.

“Shut... up,” Ela’s voice, weak but startlingly clear, cut through the haze of Jade’s panic like a blade.

Jade froze mid-sob, lifting her tear-streaked face to look at Ela. “W-what...?”

“You’re so noisy...” Ela repeated, her voice still faint but far less strained than before, maybe even a hint of humour hidden beneath the sheer exhaustion.

Confusion and shock gripped Jade as her mind scrambled to make sense of what she was hearing.

It took a moment for her to process what else was different—the dripping sound was *gone*.

Her eyes widened as she looked down at Ela’s body.

The myriad of wounds, deep and vicious, were no longer bleeding.

Not a single drop of blood leaked from them anymore.

“What the fuck...” Jade breathed, her voice barely above a whisper.

She leaned closer, her trembling hands hovering just above Ela’s torn and bloodied clothes.

The cuts and gashes, once oozing life onto the table, now seemed eerily still. As if by some impossible miracle, the bleeding had completely stopped.

“Ela...” Jade muttered, her voice shaking with a mix of disbelief and hope. “What... *How*...?”