

Chapter 180 - Anima Novacula

The door took another hit.

The barricade shifted—not catastrophically, not yet, but soon.

The remnants of the shelving unit that Higgins had used as the main piece of the barricade scraped inward another centimeter. The door flexed against its wedge and settled back, but the wedge itself had compressed visibly from the first impact, and compressed wedges had a certain direction they moved in and it *wasn't* back.

I did the math without meaning to.

‘Three more hits like that, maybe four if the frame holds better than expected, and we are going to have a very different kind of problem...’

I looked around at what we had available.

Reina, one functional arm, back against the wall beside the barricade with her remaining pistol up and her jaw set in the particular way of someone who had already decided how they were going to handle whatever came through the door.

Kaito, still upright through what I was increasingly convinced was a personal philosophical commitment to remaining upright, cybernetic arms braced against the shelving unit.

Takeda on the floor behind us, motionless, the emergency blanket catching the dim light in dull silver.

Higgins somewhere deeper in the building, looking for a way out that didn't involve the very front door we're not trying to let the Scavs breach through in that exact moment.

Backup in ten, fifteen minutes, Reina had said.

That was a long fucking time.

The door took another hit and the wedge skittered sideways a full inch before Kaito's boot caught it and shoved it back. The sound rang off every hard surface in the foyer and came back at us from three directions simultaneously.

"Kaito—"

"I see it."

He was already repositioning, getting his weight lower, his shoulder into the shelving unit instead of just his hands.

I moved up beside him and added what I had, which was a Body stat of 6 and the rapidly clarifying understanding that this was not going to be a question of *if*, but *when*.

The fourth impact, surprisingly, already answered the question.

It didn't come where we had expected it to.

The frame of the door gave before the barricade did—the area around where I had used [Anima Razor] tore free of the rockcrete surround with a grinding crack that sent dust cascading from the ceiling, before the whole door torqued sideways under its own weight and the weight of everything stacked against it.

The barricade didn't so much collapse as it practically erupted towards us, the door dropping flat, the shelving unit pivoting on its base and going with it, and suddenly the gap where the door had been had turned into an open mouth with four Scavs already halfway through it before the debris had finished settling.

Before Kaito and I could gather our bearings and actually fully realize what had happened.

They'd been right up against the door and ready to go the moment it went.

The foyer compressed immediately.

Four people in a narrow space becomes a very different calculation when four more arrive through the only entrance, and the Scavs were banking on exactly that—closing the distance before Reina's pistols could make the argument they were built to make, turning it into the kind of fight where reach and mass counted for more than gunfire and accuracy.

Nevertheless, Reina fired five times in the first second.

One Scav went down in the doorway and stayed there. The second set of shots connected but didn't drop the second she had aimed for—the Scav staggered, kept moving, closed the remaining distance with Kaito with that specific kind of momentum of someone running on something far stronger than simply bad judgment.

The third one she aimed for, dropped like a puppet with its strings cut an instant after his head snapped back.

That bought me enough time to react to the fourth and last Scav coming directly at me—the one who had been just behind the third and also aiming for me.

Thanks to Reina, I was already moving when he arrived.

The Raz came out of its sheath easily and I stepped *into* the gap rather than back from it, putting myself between the press of bodies and Takeda behind us, letting the foyer's geometry do the work that our numbers couldn't.

Narrow enough that they couldn't flank. Narrow enough that two of them couldn't effectively engage me simultaneously without getting in each other's way—which proved smart right away, as another set of Scavs followed the first group almost immediately.

[CQC] had read the space like a book and my body had simply moved to fill it.

The Scav came in high, aiming straight for my throat with a wicked looking fishknife-looking thing and I let him, instead stepping inside his reach and putting the Raz into the gap between his ribs before he'd finished the motion.

He went down and I was already redirecting, using his dropping mass as a brief obstacle between myself and the next Scav that had barrelled through the opening—and that's when [Lethal Flow] kicked in.

The world didn't slow so much as thicken, reality pulling itself back from the edges of full-speed and giving me something that felt almost like stillness by comparison.

My own breathing came loud in the relative quiet of it, my heartbeat measured, everything outside of the effect moving like it was pushing through deep, deep water.

'You really should have thought about what a generous application of [Anima Razor] would do to a door frame, you absolute—'

I shelved the self-recrimination. Later problem.

The current problem was the five additional Scavs I could now count coming in behind the initial four, fanning out across as they passed the threshold into the foyer's width with the specific intent of making the narrow geometry work *for* them rather than against them.

Reina had stepped back in the moment before the door gave, which had been the right instinct for not getting immediately trampled and the wrong outcome for having a firing line—she had bodies, specifically mine and Kaito's, between her and any viable target, which meant her guns were momentarily theoretical.

'Run or fight?' The question answered itself almost immediately. 'Can't run. Not with Takeda on the floor and the Scavs already inside...'

I let my eyes finish their sweep and made the call.

The [Lethal Flow] effect gave me just enough of the freeze to do it properly—I got both hands on the Scav I'd already killed, still mid-fall in front of me, and used the last of his downward momentum and everything my Body stat could put behind it, and shoved the deadweight forward into the incoming group with as much force as I could generate from a standing redirect.

Then I used the counteracting force and stepped hard in the opposite direction, further into the back of the foyer and towards Takeda and Reina, dropping my center of gravity into a wide, heavy-set stance—low enough to give Reina a clean firing line over my head, braced enough to take a collision from anything that got through the gap without going down.

'Stay low, Ela. Friendly-fire through the back of the skull is not the way you want this story to end...!'

The body hit the incoming group like a bad surprise just as the world snapped back to full speed.

Reina's guns answered immediately from somewhere above and behind me, the pressure of each shot punching through my gut at that angle and proximity.

Kaito, meanwhile, had finally closed with the second Scav on the left flank—the one Reina had tagged earlier, already running compromised, not moving the way he should have been.

The cybernetic arm came around in a short, brutal arc, the kind of strike that didn't need to be elegant because the force behind it rendered elegance entirely beside the point.

The Scav's head simply ceased to exist.

One instant it was there, the next it was a fine, catastrophic mist of bone fragment and matter that painted the wall behind him in a wide radius, the sound of it lost somewhere under the general mayhem but the visual very much not.

Kaito didn't bother to waste time looking at what he'd done.

Just reset his stance and moved to the next problem that was already incoming.

Reina fired once again somewhere over my left shoulder and a Scav dropped in my peripheral vision, but my eyes were already tracking past it—because three of the remaining Scavs had spread wide enough to get clear sightlines, and the barrels of their makeshift weapons were coming up in a way that put me, Takeda on the floor behind me, and Reina in the same rough cone of fire simultaneously.

My eyes went wide and for a fraction of a second my brain did the thing it had always done—locked up, stalled, threw every option on the table simultaneously and couldn't pick one.

Then, suddenly... it didn't.

It wasn't Ego this time, or even Edge.

Not a Skill kicking in with downloaded instinct or a Perk finding an applicable clause.

Just whatever had been quietly rebuilding itself inside me over the last several months in Neo Avalis, some fundamental rewiring that hadn't announced itself and didn't now, simply producing a clear and immediate "*No. Not today.*" from somewhere bedrock-level and getting on with it.

The calculus ran itself in the time it took to blink: Duck and get clear, or stay and cover them.

Two options. One outcome each.

The answer my brain came back with surprised me more than the entire situation did—because I had never been the type.

Not in the life before this one, not in the early weeks of this one.

Heroic had never been a word that applied to my particular decision-making framework under pressure.

Apparently that had changed at some point without my input, at least for this one instance.

I turned, dropped my chin to my chest, and hauled the bomber jacket open with both hands—arms spread wide, fabric pulled out as far as it would go, making the largest surface area I could manufacture out of what I had available.

My back to the barrels. Takeda on the floor in front of me, Reina's eyes going wide as she watched me do so from just a meter away.

The makeshift weapons fired.

The impacts came in fast succession—nails and railspikes punching into the jacket's back with the flat, percussive authority of sharp projectiles fired at high speeds, and the kinetic force of several shots hitting within the same half-second shoved me forward whether my Body stat had opinions about it or not.

I staggered, three steps, four, momentum I hadn't chosen carrying me until I got a foot properly planted and arrested the remaining hits through sheer stubbornness, jaw locked and teeth gnashing, running a rapid internal check on whether anything had made it through Misha's handiwork or whether the jacket was living up to whatever she'd under-charged me for it.

Reina, luckily, wasn't the type to freeze at a surprising sight *or* under pressure—she was the type to immediately identify the window it created and climb through it. The moment of relative invulnerability my body and equipment had bought her gave her the angle she needed.

She was already around my right side, pistol coming up and firing a series of shots that the foyer's rockcrete walls caught and multiplied and threw back at us from every direction simultaneously, each echo compounding the last into something that stopped being sound and started being nothing but cacophonous noise, driving a fresh spike of ringing pain through both ears with the cheerful indifference of physics doing exactly what physics did in enclosed spaces when someone started shooting.

The early-onset tinnitus I was going to receive for my efforts here today was going to be genuinely impressive, I had no doubts.

"You good?"

Reina's voice, directed at me, which meant the immediate problem had been resolved in the direction she'd been shooting.

I took a second to actually figure out the answer to that question.

The honest version was: No, not even slightly.

My back felt like I'd been worked over with a plank of something heavy, the kind of deep, spreading pain that started as impact shock and was rapidly renegotiating itself into something more specific and sustained.

My own breathing was already telling me things I didn't want to hear—each inhale pulling short and sharp against a resistance that wasn't there before, the specific quality of pain that [First-Aid]'s knowledge base associated with cracked or fractured ribs with a confidence I found *deeply* inconvenient. Several of them, by the sheer feel of it all.

But I patted down the inside of the jacket methodically, running my hands across the fabric where the impacts had landed, checking the interior lining on the side that mattered.

Nothing had made it through.

Misha's equipment had done exactly what Misha's equipment had apparently been built to do, and I made a mental note to give her extra-many hugs and tuft-rubs next time I saw her.

I closed the jacket back around myself, straightened up as much as the ribs were prepared to allow, and stuck a weak thumb up in Reina's direction.

Then I turned toward the door and felt the brief, hard-won respite evaporate *immediately*.

More of the Scavs were incoming.

They were clambering over their own fallen and the debris that had been the barricade, filling the gap with the kind of persistent, replaceable momentum that said the Scrapwrights had already gotten at least parts of their reinforcements and were spending them freely and willingly.

The math, which had briefly looked like it might be trending in a survivable direction, had updated itself in the wrong direction again.

Reina was already reloading, one-handed, the magazine seated and the slide racked with a practiced efficiency that under different circumstances I would've taken a moment to appreciate properly.

Kaito had tightened his position without me tracking when, pulling closer to our cluster, his cybernetic arms up and his expression carrying the focused blankness of someone who'd moved past pain into pure last-embers and task management.

Then Higgins came down the hallway behind us.

He was moving faster than his body had any business moving right now, and it showed—breath coming in audible, laboured pulls, a dark smear at the corner of his mouth that hadn't been there before, the specific colour of someone whose compromised lungs had just been asked to support a sprint and had complied under protest.

He had his pistol out and he jerked his head back toward the corridor he'd come from with an urgency that cut through the noise of the foyer immediately.

"Window," he got out, between carefully rationed breaths. "End of the hall. Alley below—still clear. We can make the drop."

For approximately one second, that was the best news I'd heard all evening.

Then the Scavs pushed through the doorway and six of them were in the foyer with us, spreading wide before we could collapse the angle, and it was immediately, viscerally obvious that the group outside had grown massively since we'd gotten here.

There was no way to even guess what was still on the street.

No way to know what the Scrapwrights had pulled in or how many more were already en route. The foyer had gone from a defensible chokepoint to a shrinking box in the space of thirty seconds, and the box was only continuing to shrink.

The window was the only direction that still had an exit at the end of it.

'The real problem is Takeda,' the thought surfaced unbidden but true. *'If we simply left him, we could run right now...'*

It was a dishonorable thought.

The kind that would've ended the conversation immediately if Higgins, Kaito or Reina had been able to hear it—Nighon culture had strong opinions about that particular category of tactical decision, and none of them were positive.

But the tactically correct choice and the honorable one weren't always the same thing, and the part of my brain that had been running cold calculations all evening knew *exactly* which column this one fell into.

We were all running on fumes. Some of us were running on considerably *less* than that.

And Takeda's deadweight was the single variable that turned an already extremely difficult exit into a downright impossible one.

'I don't want to leave him,' came the immediate counter, quieter but just as certain. *'Not after everything I just put into keeping him alive...'*

My eyes dropped to him—and snagged on *something*.

The katana was sheathed at his side, lying against the floor. The black lacquered sheath was unmarked, sitting completely still and utterly unmarred amid the chaos and detritus that dominated the foyer.

Higgins had apparently grabbed it when he'd pulled Takeda from the car, a detail I hadn't consciously registered until this exact moment.

I stared at it for what felt like a long time, yet was probably the duration of a single heartbeat.

My brain did the thing from earlier again. The thing it had apparently developed recently, without consulting me, where it took two pieces of information that had no obvious business being in the same world and put them there anyway.

"[Anima Razor] elongates the blade," Mr. Shori had once said, when we had talked about its functions more in-depth. *"Extends along whatever surface it's applied to."*

'...Longer blade. Longer Razor...'

Whether that was genuine tactical innovation or the first sign that the evening had finally cracked something loose upstairs, I genuinely couldn't tell.

It didn't matter, though.

My body had already made the decision and was moving before the conscious part of my brain had finished running the feasibility check.

"Buy me fifteen seconds," I said to the room, and didn't wait to see how that landed.

By now, after everything, I was operating on the reasonable assumption that whatever thin thread of professional trust I'd managed to build with this crew over the course of the evening was going to have to be enough for this gamble.

I reached down and picked up the katana.

The sheath came off cleanly and the blade underneath was just as black and warm in a way that registered through my palms before my eyes had fully processed the visual. It sat in my hands with a balance that made my [CQC] and [Martial Arts] instincts file an immediate positive assessment without being asked.

Then I started the Sigils and the warm feeling became significantly less relevant.

I had never attempted to use [Anima Razor] with something already in my hands.

The most recent download had covered it—technically, peripherally, in a small, narrow section that I had specifically taken, noted as theoretical, and filed under “*definitely not before Level 3 at the absolute earliest*” with the firm intention of honoring that assessment.

That small section was currently the *only* reference I had, and the gap between theoretical knowledge and actual muscle memory was making itself known in real time through every joint and ligament below my wrists.

My fingers moved in configurations that fingers were simply not architecturally designed for.

The Sigils for a free-form application and the adjustments required for a channeled-through-object application were related in the way that two languages with the same root were related—recognizable, partially transferable, and deeply unforgiving of the gaps in translation.

The cramping started at the second knuckle of my right hand and spread outward with an enthusiasm I found *deeply* unreasonable and straight up offensive.

The pain had a bright, specific quality—not blunt or spreading, but precise, sharp and utterly insistent, every overextended joint filing its complaint in sequence.

I kept drawing anyway.

Because around me, the foyer had already started going fully sideways, as I heard the crew meet the oncoming Scavs once more.

I shut my eyes and continued to focus on drawing.

The foyer filled in through sound instead of sight, layered and overlapping, close enough that some of it arrived as physical sensation before it registered as information.

Gunfire—Reina's pistol, the sharp familiar crack of it, then the deeper, percussive reports of the Scavwright makeshift weapons answering back.

The wet, dense impact of something bladed meeting resistance, followed by a sound that wasn't quite a scream and wasn't quite a grunt but occupied the space between them.

Kaito's cybernetic arm connecting with something structural, the crunch of it carrying differently than the sounds around it.

Boots on debris.

Heavy, deliberate breathing—someone managing pain through respiratory control.

The specific sharp exhale of a person taking a hit and deciding it wasn't enough to stop them.

I kept drawing despite it all.

Railspikes and nails—or bullets, maybe, I had no way to tell—found my jacket again, and then my legs, the impacts arriving as sharp shoves against the fabric that rocked my balance without breaking it.

The pants were doing better than the jacket, the material holding with enough authority that I stayed hunched over Takeda without going down, which was all I needed from them.

I absorbed each impact and redistributed and kept my fingers moving through the agony of configurations they were never meant to hold.

More gunfire. A scream that cut off too quickly.

The meaty percussion of close-quarters work, bones making the sounds bones made when something with Kaito's cybernetic arm behind it found them.

Then—cutting through all of it, in a register I hadn't heard from either of them before—Reina's voice, stripped of everything professional and controlled, just raw and immediate and wrong.

"Higgins—!"

Kaito's voice landing on top of it, the same word, the same tone.

A single gunshot. A real one—not a makeshift, not a railspike weapon, the sound of something manufactured and purposeful.

And then the flat, final slap of a body hitting the floor somewhere deeper in the foyer, and the specific silence that followed it that lasted only a fraction of a second before the chaos rushed back in to fill the space.

My hands kept moving regardless.

The Anima was building past anything I'd accumulated before—I could feel it without looking, the pull of it through my fingers and down the blade's length like current finding a channel, Sprites converging from the walls and floor and the air itself in numbers that were starting to become visible to the naked eye as things started distorting around the blade's edge.

I kept going, pouring everything I had into it as fast as I could.

Sweat was running freely by then, the kind that came from sustained pain and effort combined, my breathing reduced to short, uncontrolled gasps that the cracked ribs had negotiated down to the minimum viable amount.

The cramping in my hands had long since stopped being something I was managing and become something I was simply enduring on the other side of a decision I'd already made.

Then the pull peaked—the Anima hitting a threshold I felt in my sternum more than my hands, the blade vibrating faintly against my palm with the barely-contained pressure of it, condensed air manifesting visibly along the entire length of the katana in a way that made the edges look completely malformed and uncertain, like the boundary between the blade and the rest of the world had stopped being a settled question.

I filled my lungs with what I had left.

"*Get down—!*"

The words came out ragged and breathless and I hoped, with everything I had left to hope with, that Reina and Kaito were the type to hear that tone and move first and ask questions after.

I turned.

One motion—smooth where everything else had been ragged, the [{Anima Razor}] downloads overriding the exhaustion for the single second it took, the blade coming around in a wide, committed arc that covered the full width of the foyer.

[Anima Razor]

The condensed air along the blade's length released all at once.

The sound it made in the enclosed space was not something I had any sort of real reference point for—it *started* as the scream I'd come to associate with [Anima Razor] but then simply kept going past that, kept building, the acoustics of the rockcrete foyer compressing and amplifying and reflecting it back from every surface simultaneously until it stopped being a sound my ears could process and became something that simply *happened* to them instead.

The ringing that had been my constant companion for the last ten minutes peaked into a single, sustained, enormous note—

And then my eardrums finally gave up.

There was a sudden, total transition from cacophony to a deep, pressurized silence that wasn't silence at all but the mere absence of my ability to receive said noise, the world continuing to happen at full volume somewhere on the other side of the barrier.

I felt the pressure change in my jaw and behind my eyes, but I was already mid-motion, so I kept swinging.

The [Anima Razor] didn't care about any of that, after all.

It covered the width of the foyer in the first fraction of the arc and didn't slow—didn't compress against the rockcrete walls the way physics suggested it should, just continued, the leading edge burying itself into the wall material on the left side and passing through it with the same indifferent momentum it had carried through the air, the cut appearing in the concrete face in a clean, horizontal line that ran the full length of the swing.

The right wall received the same as I finished my swing.

The blade's reach had extended the [Anima Razor] output along the katana's entire length and the result was something that thought in terms of *foyer widths* rather than blade widths, and the foyer had run out of foyer before it had run out of reach.

For a moment—a long, strange, breathless moment—nothing seemed to happen when I finally finished the swing.

The Scavs that had been standing in the arc's path were standing in it just as still.

The clean cut existed in the walls.

The air sat still.

Then, finally, the airblade collapsed.

The release was total and instantaneous—all that condensed, accumulated pressure surrendering its cohesion at once and *pulling*, dragging the surrounding air inward toward the blade's final position somewhere on the opposite side of the foyer with a force that had no interest in what was attached to the air around it.

The implosion moved toward the door in a fraction of a second, and it took *everything* it had been close to within the foyer with it.

The Scavs went first—or rather, the halves of them that the arc had separated went in different directions simultaneously, the cuts that hadn't announced themselves so far announcing themselves all at once, the bodies coming apart along the lines the airblade had drawn through them and the resulting pieces thrown violently toward the doorway in a torrent of mass, gore and blood.

The rockcrete walls, cut through on both sides, buckled inward along the fault lines, the structural integrity of the foyer's front section failing in sequence and folding toward the door with a grinding, catastrophic compression that sent dust and fragment and material cascading in the same direction as everything else.

The entrance disappeared under a mountain of debris.

Rockcrete and door frame, the remnants of the barricade and the Scavs—what remained of them—all of it driven forward and down into a dense, devastated pile that sealed the opening more completely than anything we could have stacked against it, the whole mass settling with a series of deep, grinding impacts I felt through the floor rather than heard.

The walls on either side of where the foyer's front had been were ragged at the edges, the cut lines running through them clean and straight against the chaotic destruction surrounding them, the only geometric thing left in a space that had otherwise abandoned geometry entirely.

The dust—a mixture of rockcrete, concrete and human particulate—hung in the dim light.

Reina and Kaito were flat on the floor, prone, heads down—they'd gone the instant my warning had reached them and hadn't come back up yet, which was the right call and I was *enormously* glad they'd taken it.

The debris field around them was extensive and recent and speckled throughout with a red so dark it read almost black in the low light, distributed across every surface within range with the thoroughness of a detail-obsessed painter wanting to make sure it was absolutely everywhere.

I was still holding the katana... Or rather, I could not let it go any longer.

My hands were cramped beyond recognition and shaking—both of them, *visibly*.

The cramping and shaking had moved past the stage of being localized and become a full-system response, every muscle from the fingertips to the shoulders running its own independent assessment of what I'd just asked them to do.

The exhaustion that followed heavy [{Anima Razor}] usage was sitting behind my eyes and at the base of my skull with the settled weight of something that had been waiting for the work to stop before presenting the bill.

And the bill came... *Now*.

My eyes rolled back and the world turned dark around me as I lost consciousness...