

Chapter 46 - Angustiae

Overwhelmed by a crushing wave of guilt, my mind was in turmoil.

Despite the urgency screaming at me to flee, a stronger force within refused to abandon another girl to her fate, not after the haunting memory of my previous failure. In that critical moment, my decision was almost instinctual—compelled more by a deep-seated need for redemption than by any strategic calculation.

Clad in my Pseudo-Tier 1 Operator gear, armed with a T1 knife for dire situations, and with the element of surprise on my side, I realised I was *far* better equipped this time.

Furthermore, hidden within the confines of this alley and only the assailants existing as potential witnesses, I had the freedom to act unreservedly. Here, shrouded in anonymity, the risk of recognition, and the inevitable, subsequent questions, was nonexistent.

Without even fully processing my decision, I found myself back inside the cubby, before stepping closer towards the edge of it, driven by an unyielding resolve.

As I cautiously peeked around the cubby's corner, my worst fears were confirmed.

A girl, seemingly close to my own age though difficult to assess from my vantage point, was struggling against the netrunner's crew. Her hands were restrained by one of the larger men in the group, her movements restricted as they dragged her further into the alley's shadowy embrace.

Caught in a whirlwind of panic, the thought raced through my mind, '*Why now, of all possible moments?!*'

I desperately scanned my surroundings for anything that could tip the scales in her favour.

The crew looming over the girl appeared to be equipped with nothing more than rudimentary gear, lacking anything that matched or surpassed Pseudo-Tier 1. This small detail afforded me a sliver of hope, given my gear's slight superiority.

Yet, the stark reality was that I was significantly outnumbered—five against one. Moreover, my skills in hand-to-hand combat were virtually nonexistent.

Echoing in my mind were the wise words of renowned martial artists from my previous life, underscoring a harsh truth: Victory is downright impossible when facing superior numbers, especially when the opponents aren't foolish enough to give you an opening.

This wasn't a video game, despite the uncanny resemblance in certain moments. I couldn't just waltz up and beat them all down by myself. I was just a random girl with slightly better gear than them, that's it.

As desperation mounted, I noticed the netrunner beginning to regain consciousness, signalling my dwindling chance to act from the safety of stealth.

In a moment of frantic improvisation, I crouched down and scooped together an assortment of debris—stones, broken shards, and discarded plastic—anything within reach. Drawing my knife, I struck the makeshift arsenal with its handle twice, crudely breaking the pieces into smaller sizes, and prepared myself for what came next as I picked up the pile.

Gripping the debris, now honed to dangerous precision, I braced as the netrunner beside me began to stir, her groans growing louder.

Any moment now, she'd be alert enough to betray my hiding spot.

With the debris ready, I invoked my [Sharpen] Perk, enhancing every edge on every piece of it to its absolute maximum sharpness, transforming them into thoroughly dangerous shrapnel.

I darted from my cover, closing the distance slightly to ensure a better angle.

Fully relying on the downloaded muscle memory from my Level 4 [Throwing] Skill, I readied myself for a critical manoeuvre—I did not intend on trying to adjust anything, simply trusting the System to guide my throw.

Focusing deeply, I tapped into my repertoire of Abilities as well.

'Blademaster's Throw.'

The act of throwing the debris was almost reflexive, the sharpened edges slicing, ripping and tearing into my skin as they were propelled forward. Thanks to the Ability, I launched them at quintuple the speed towards the assailants.

My heart raced, hoping against all odds that my aim would be true and spare the girl from harm. There was no time to close the gap for a safer shot, however; I had to trust in my Skills and the System.

The debris tore through the air with a violent hiss, striking with the ferocity of flechettes. In an instant, the alleyway erupted into chaos, punctuated by cries of agony.

Blood erupted in a grotesque, abstractionist painting as the sharpened shards punctured skin and flesh, leaving behind a trail of utter and complete carnage.

Three of the assailants were immediately overwhelmed by the onslaught, collapsing to the ground amidst screams of blinding agony. They writhed, their hands desperately clutching at wounds across their bodies—sides, arms, chests—each puncture vastly more brutal and deadly than I had anticipated.

The man who had been restraining the girl's hands dropped to his knees, his arms a horrific sight of torn flesh, muscle and bone, profusely bleeding and rendered completely useless by the abrupt impact of the debris.

Miraculously, one figure managed to remain upright, albeit barely. Positioned furthest from the epicentre of my attack, she was speckled with myriad cuts—a stark line of profuse bleeding across her cheek, deep slashes on her arms, and gashes on her legs.

The wounds were painful, undoubtedly, but not enough to incapacitate her fully.

Her eyes, widened with shock and pain, darted around, taking in the sudden shift in the situation's dynamics, trying to figure out what had just happened.

My heart sank immediately, however, as I witnessed the unintended collateral damage of my desperate act.

The girl, the unintended victim of my intervention, screamed in pain, her body curling forwards protectively as she cradled her arms.

The realisation that my actions had harmed her as well filled me with horror. Her hands, which had been in the direct line of fire, bore the brunt of my attempt to save her, leaving her caught in the crossfire of my well-intended but devastatingly misguided rescue attempt.

"Fuck!" I hissed under my breath, my voice escalating to a shout, "Run, *now*!"

My heart sank even further when, against all odds, the girl bolted in the least desirable direction—straight towards me.

With no time to redirect her, I charged forward to intercept her, my gaze snapping to the last assailant still on her feet. She had recovered from her initial shock at my outburst and was now charging at me with renewed determination, hot on the heels of the girl, while pulling out a menacing looking knife.

"Great. Just fucking *great*," I muttered to myself, the gravity of the situation fully dawning on me. I was completely in over my head, and things were spiralling out of control at an insanely fast rate.

Gripping my knife tighter and preparing for any potential confrontation, I sped towards the girl, my heart racing. To my utter shock, as she drew nearer and I could get a better look, recognition dawned on me.

"Huh?! What the hell are *you* doing here?" I exclaimed, my voice laced with disbelief and concern. The last place I expected to encounter Aki was here, on the 33rd floor, especially in this exact situation. Just moments ago, she was safe at Mr. Shori's, and now, she was tangled in this dangerous predicament with me.

Without the luxury of time for a detailed inquiry, I swiftly grabbed Aki's left arm, thankfully less injured as her profusely bleeding right one, as soon as I reached her. I urged us forward, racing towards the alley's exit where I had initially entered from, hoping to lose the woman tailing us closely.

The alleyway's escape seemed feasible until I realised Aki's physical condition couldn't match mine, anchored by my enhanced physical capabilities from my rank 4 Body Attribute. Alone, perhaps I could've narrowly escaped the woman's clutches, but Aki's slower pace held us back, making the pursuer's steps ominously closer.

My mind was a whirlwind of confusion and urgency, '*What the fuck is Aki doing here?! How did she even get here? And why?!*'

In the face of our dwindling chance to evade the pursuer due to Aki's slower pace, I instinctively acted, lifting Aki into my arms in a swift princess carry. Her surprised yelp echoed as I made a sharp turn and charged towards the alley's wall.

"What are you—?!" Aki's question was cut short as we hit the wall, my feet finding purchase as the [Wall Runner] Perk sprung into action.

The added weight of another person significantly hampered my speed, yet I pressed on, determined to scale the vertical surface. The woman pursuing us reached our previous spot just a hair's breadth too late to catch us as we ascended beyond her grasp.

I didn't dare glance back to witness her reaction, although I could imagine the shock on her face at the sight of us simply defying gravity to escape her wrath. My muscles strained under the effort, fully aware that failing to reach the top before the Perk's energy waned would spell disaster for both Aki and me.

Gasping for air, I neared the top of the building, pushing myself to the limits as the reservoir of energy from my [Wall Runner] Perk dwindled alarmingly. My body moved on pure adrenaline, driven by a desperate will to survive.

Just as the Perk's energy vanished, relinquishing its gravity-defying grip, I managed to hurl Aki onto the safety of the rooftop. But gravity pulled me backward, right into an ominous fall back down the wall, towards the alley and the looming threat below.

In a frantic, last-second effort, I caught the edge of the roof with my right hand, barely arresting my descent into potential disaster. The reality of hanging by one hand, a feat utterly glamorised in fiction, I know realised, hit hard. Despite my enhanced physical capabilities and my very manageable weight, my grip began to falter under the strain almost immediately.

Determined not to die, I reached up with my left hand, still clenching my RaZ, to gain a precarious hold on the roof. Taking deep, laboured breaths to steady myself, I mustered the strength to haul my body up.

I collapsed at the rooftop's edge, panting heavily, my lungs burning for air—but for now, at least, I was safe.

An intangible pull in my mind told me that the last remaining member of the crew had thankfully given up the chase and was starting to take care of the netrunner, as the [Homing Beacon] that had inadvertently been applied to her through my throw told me her exact location.

"What in the world just happened? Ela, how the fuck did you just do that?" Aki's bewildered voice broke through the silence, snapping me back to the reality that I wasn't alone on this rooftop.

I gulped down several deep breaths, trying to shake off the fatigue that clung to my body like a heavy cloak. Slowly, I rolled onto my side and pushed myself upright, my legs screaming with exertion, as if I had just sprinted through the toughest marathon of my life.

"Same question to you, Aki! What the fuck are you doing in a place like this?!" I retorted, more harshly than I intended. Catching myself, I tried to soften my tone. "But we don't have time for that now. We need to move, fast. Let me see your hand."

Approaching her, I reached out and gently took hold of her right arm, inspecting her hand for any injuries. She seemed reluctant, a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, but I was firm and simply ignored her light attempts at breaking free.

We were in a severely precarious situation, with the netrunner's crew possibly having reinforcements nearby. Personal feelings had to take a backseat to urgency for now, as much as I wanted Aki to trust me in the future.

Aki's hand was a sight that immediately drew a sharp intake of breath from me.

It was apparent that two pieces of the debris I had thrown had viciously pierced her right hand, leaving a gaping hole the size of a small coin that was steadily oozing blood onto the rooftop. Another piece had sliced deeply across her arm, leaving a raw, angry mark that similarly pooled blood down her arm.

Despite the severity of her injuries, Aki bore them with an unsettling stoicism, her face betraying little of the pain she must have been feeling. It was a disturbing reminder of how one could grow all too familiar with pain, numbing the instinctive reactions that should accompany such injuries—something I was all too familiar with myself and sent a surge of sympathy through me.

Without hesitation, I set to work.

I tore pieces from my work-shirt, the fabric yielding easily under the keen edge of my RaZ, creating strips that I then wrapped tightly around her hand and arm, letting myself be guided by both my [Slicing] and [First-Aid] Skills' knowledge.

The makeshift bandages were crude but effective, staunching the flow of blood and offering some semblance of protection against further contamination.

"We'll need to get this properly cleaned and stitched up later," I told her firmly, ensuring the bandages were secure before scanning the rooftop for our next move. "This will hold for now, but we can't delay getting you proper medical attention."

Turning, I headed towards the far end of the apartment roof, my mind already racing with our next steps. Aki followed silently, a mix of utter confusion and awe in her eyes as she trailed behind me. Her quiet acceptance of the situation was both a relief and a burden, a reminder of the responsibility I had inadvertently taken on.

'We have to find a way down, without being seen,' I mused to myself, checking for any potential emergency ladders or similar that could make our extraction easier. 'Aki won't be able to use her arm properly, so a straight up free-climb like I did last time won't be possible for her and I definitely can't carry her down either...'

Peering over the edge of the rooftop, I quickly spotted a maintenance ladder on the far side, a potential lifeline in our precarious situation. It was a bit of a stretch, but it was the best option we had given Aki's injury and our need to remain undetected.

With Aki's limited mobility in mind, I adjusted our route slightly, planning to use the cover of various ventilation units and receiver dishes to stay out of sight from the ground as much as possible.

"Over there," I pointed out to Aki, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "We'll use that ladder to get down. Just take it slow and steady."

I led the way, keeping a close eye on Aki as we manoeuvred across the rooftop, using every bit of cover to our advantage. My heart was pounding, not just from the physical exertion but also from the adrenaline of the situation. As we approached the ladder, I took a moment to assess our surroundings, ensuring that the coast was clear before we made our descent.

"Remember, let me go first. I'll be right below you if you slip," I instructed, trying to offer some reassurance despite the gravity of our situation. It was already harrowing for me, but for somebody with pre-existing conditions like Aki, this whole situation she ended up getting caught in for god knows what reason was likely almost enough to fully send her, so I tried my best to appear as confident as I could be, to keep her relatively calm.

Once we reached the ground, I quickly pulled up my map, scanning for the quickest route to the nearest elevators while avoiding the main thoroughfares. The possibility of running into Falkum Industries' security was a risk we couldn't afford, as I still didn't know whether the netrunner and her crew had been part of the corporation or not, especially not with Aki injured like that.

Taking a deep breath, I led Aki through a series of narrow alleyways and less frequented paths, my eyes constantly darting around for any signs of the security personnel.

I was thankful that the girl had decided to simply be quiet and follow my lead to the letter, as I was thoroughly preoccupied with trying to get the both of us out of the floor alive. I had no extra energy to spare on any form of babysitting or pampering, but luckily, it appeared that Aki was smart enough to understand the situation we were in, as she followed me with a surprising level of expertise.

To get to the elevators, I either had to take the risk and lead Aki through the upcoming crossroad and past the security or take a massive detour through around a dozen alleys.

'Considering her injuries, we should take the risk... I don't know exactly how much blood she lost or how much she can take. She doesn't look too bad right now, but that doesn't necessarily mean much once the adrenaline runs out,' I thought to myself, making the decision to take the risky, but faster route.

As we neared the crossroad that led to the nearest elevator, I paused, listening intently for any signs of potentially approaching guards. The last thing we needed was to be caught now, so close to our escape route. With one final look to ensure the coast was clear, I

gestured for Aki to follow, my mind set on getting us out of this situation as swiftly and silently as possible.

Navigating the dense crowd, I tried to blend in, keeping my head down and moving with the flow of people.

The scarf around my face provided some level of anonymity, but Aki's exposure worried me. She stood out with her work and blood-stained attire, a stark contrast to the grimy, cyberpunk-typical fashion favoured by most around us.

I could clearly see the heightened alertness of the Falkrum Industries' guards, their eyes scanning the crowd with a mix of urgency and precision. It was clear they were looking for someone, and deep down, I feared it was us.

The connection between the netrunner crew and Falkrum Industries seemed increasingly likely, and I cursed under my breath over my rotten luck. *'Fuck! Of course they had to be Falkrum Industries-adjacent... I guess it makes sense, if you think about it. Who else would've known about the shard or been looking for it in the first place?'*

I briefly considered our options.

Ditching our clothing was not feasible at the moment, as being essentially naked was going to be even more of an eye-catcher than what we were currently wearing, and any sudden movements or attempts to flee would only draw more attention.

I ultimately figured that our best bet was to continue moving inconspicuously towards the elevator, hoping to slip away before being recognized.

"Stay close and follow my lead," I whispered to Aki, keeping my voice as low as possible. "Try to look casual, like we're just another pair of shoppers heading towards the elevators to go home... And link your arm with mine. We have to hide the bandages somehow."

As we approached the crossroad, I slowed our pace slightly, not wanting to appear too hurried or suspicious. My eyes darted between the guards, looking for any sign that they had spotted us.

Every second felt like an eternity, each step a massive risk as their attentive eyes roamed around the crossroad, their hands ready to draw their pistols—it seemed that the non-lethal options weren't even on the table anymore.

The crowd around us was our only shield, a diverse mix of individuals going about their daily lives, blissfully unaware of the danger we were in; the danger they were inadvertently protecting us from.

I continued to guide us through the bustling crowd, trying to use the natural movement of the people around us for cover. If Aki and I had been more in sync, we might have faked a lively conversation about shopping or something equally mundane to really sell the illusion that we were just another pair of shoppers.

However, I hesitated to start such an act, fearing that Aki's potential confusion at my abrupt conversation start or a slip-up in response due to our lack of sync might inadvertently draw attention to us. So my focus remained on maintaining a low profile instead, subtly steering us through the sea of people without causing any ripples that might betray our presence as best as possible.

As we cautiously moved past the guards, I felt a surge of renewed adrenaline rush through me. They were mere metres away, diligently scanning the farther reaches of the crowd.

Borrowing a strategy akin to Pippin and Merry's clever maneuver of leading the Ents to Isengard, under the logic that nobody would anticipate us brazenly moving close to our seekers, I was counting on this unexpected approach to evade detection.

It was a gamble, but, in my mind, it was our best shot at evading capture.

Just as Aki and I were about to turn the corner towards the elevators, my heightened alertness caught a disturbing sound - the unmistakable noise of boots pounding on the ground and the commotion of people being roughly shoved aside.

My heart raced as I realised the guards were now onto us.

"Fuck! Run, Aki!" I hissed urgently, keeping my voice low but filled with urgency as I gripped her arm more firmly, propelling us both through the throng. Our brief moment of anonymity was shattered as the guards began shouting behind us, their voices booming over the noise of the crowd.

"Falkum Industries security! Stop! Somebody hold these girls and the corporation will reimburse you for your time!" they bellowed, their pursuit growing more fervent.

Panic surged through me as I pulled Aki along, weaving through the startled crowd.

The shouts of the guards echoed in my ears, spurring me to move faster, pushing past bewildered shoppers and dodging obstacles in a frantic dash towards the elevators. Every second felt annoyingly slow, the distance to safety agonisingly close yet seemingly out of reach as the shouts of the guards grew louder, closer.

I brandished the RaZ menacingly at anyone who appeared even slightly inclined to accept the security guard's offer of a reward for capturing us.

Although I had no desire to hurt innocent people, I was very much prepared to shank a nosy bitch or two to prevent myself, and especially Aki, from falling into the hands of corporate enforcers. For corporate espionage like this, torture was undoubtedly the least of our concerns.

My heart skipped a beat as the guards' next warning rang out, "Halt, or we will shoot! Clear the area around those girls, this is your final warning!"

We were just a few steps from turning the corner, which would momentarily shield us from view, when the sharp report of a gun firing echoed behind us. On pure instinct, I manoeuvred Aki in front of me, hoping my gear would shield us both from the bullets.

As the gunfire erupted, complete and utter chaos ensued.

Bullets whizzed past us, embedding themselves in the asphalt with a force that sent shards flying. Those aimed with more lethal intent soared over our heads, their indiscriminate paths finding unintended victims among the bystanders.

I witnessed a man collapse, like a puppet with its strings cut, as a bullet found its mark in his left eye, his body hitting the ground with a thud that echoed the finality of his fate as the blood pooled out of his head.

A woman's agonised scream pierced the air when another bullet tore through her abdomen, a spray of blood painting a grim picture of her injury and plastering the people behind her in a rain of red.

Suddenly, a searing pain exploded in my right arm as a bullet collided with it, the Pseudo-Tier 1 material of my jacket straining under the impact, managing to prevent a direct penetration but not the bone-shattering force. Like a twig, my arm simply snapped under the force.

My already agonised scream intensified and mingled with the chaos as yet another bullet buried itself in my left calf, my legs giving way under the pain.

In a surprising display of quick thinking and agility, Aki caught me before I could hit the ground, her support enabling us to continue to hobble forward. Together, we rounded the corner, momentarily out of the line of fire, her assistance the only thing keeping me from collapsing in agony.

"Fuck, fuck fuck!"

Cursing under my breath, I shoved a visibly shaken Aki ahead of me, urgency lacing my voice. "You need to find an elevator and get out of here, Aki. I can use the restricted ones. Do you have a safe place to go?"

Her hesitation was brief before she nodded, guilt and worry etching her features. "Yes. I think so. I... I'm sorry, Ela. I didn't mean to—"

I cut her off with a sharp look, pain and frustration boiling inside me, not in the mood for apologies with my arm broken and my calf bleeding out at an alarming rate.

"Just go, Aki!" I urged, propelling her towards the nearest set of elevators, my injured leg dragging painfully behind me. Aki cast a conflicted glance back at me, torn momentarily, before finally taking off toward the public elevators, following my stern command.

Inside, I was a storm of frustration and disbelief at how quickly everything had spiralled out of control.

Surprisingly, the crowd around the corner seemed indifferent to the recent chaos, their apathy a stark reminder of the harsh realities of life in this world. They continued on with their day, giving the site of the recent violence a wide berth but otherwise unaffected, suggesting such disturbances were all too common, even here on a relatively "safe" floor.

As I limped towards the restricted elevators, blending back into the crowd provided a much-needed cover, especially when the guards appeared around the corner, just as I was about to reach safety.

The fear of being tracked by the blood trail I was sure to leave behind loomed over me.

However, a quick glance over my shoulder revealed an unexpected twist – there was not a single trace of my blood on the ground.

'*Huh?!*' I wondered, my mind momentarily frozen in confusion.

The wound on my calf was profusely bleeding, and my hand had been bleeding since the altercation with the netrunner's crew. Logic dictated there should be a trail, but the ground was spotless, as if my injuries had never bled at all.

In awe, I inspected my leg while continuing my painful journey to the elevator.

The instant the blood splashed out of my soaked boots onto the asphalt, it simply vanished, as if it had never existed.

No absorption, no discoloration, just gone.

A moment of realisation dawned on me, gratitude flooding my thoughts.

It had to be the work of the [Lightfoot] Perk, which prevented leaving any trace on non-challenging surfaces like the asphalt here. The G.E.M.A. System's intervention, erasing even my blood spills, offered an unexpected but lifesaving anonymity.

'*Thank you, System,*' I silently praised, relieved by this unforeseen protection as I limped towards safety.

The guards, bewildered by the lack of a blood trail that should have led directly to me, frantically scanned the ground and the crowd. Their confusion was evident as they barked at pedestrians to move aside, their eyes darting around in a futile attempt to visually spot me amongst the throng of people trying to get out of their way.

I was just steps away from the safety of the black elevator doors, fervently pressing the call button, when a guard's shout of recognition pierced the air, his finger pointed squarely at me.

Desperation surged within me, urging the elevator to hurry as I frantically pressed the button, foolishly hoping it would speed its arrival. Despite the buffer of bystanders and a good fifty metres separating us, the guards' previous use of firearms had already proven this to be but a minor obstacle, at best.

Catching the glint of their raised weapons from the periphery of my vision, I instinctively crouched, pulling my jacket tight around me for whatever protection it could afford.

Bullets soon tore through the air towards me, a wild cacophony of gunfire as the guards charged, unleashing a barrage aimed in my desperate bid for cover.

The gunfire that missed me didn't go unnoticed; it mercilessly tore through the unsuspecting crowd. The chaos was complete as screams filled the air, bodies falling or scrambling for cover.

One bullet, in a stroke of tragic misfortune, found a young man in its path, the impact visibly jarring as it plunged into his shoulder, spinning him around before he collapsed, his cries lost amidst the cacophony.

Another shot, aimed recklessly, grazed a woman's leg, slicing through fabric and flesh with equal indifference, her shock morphing into excruciating pain as she stumbled and fell, before getting trampled by the rest of the fleeing pedestrians, as she desperately tried clutching at the wound.

Then, I felt the terrifying force of bullets as they slammed into my back and side, each impact a searing explosion of pain that threatened to overpower my senses.

The durable fabric of my jacket protected me from the immediate danger of the bullets piercing my skin, but the force of the impacts buckled the material and sent ripples of pure agony through my body as I felt multiple of my ribs crackle and break under the onslaught.

My breaths became laboured, each inhalation a battle against the pain.

Salvation arrived a moment later as the elevator doors finally parted, offering a fleeting sanctuary. I hurled myself into the confines of the elevator with whatever energy I had left, slamming the button for the 43rd floor with a desperation I had never known before.

The scanner, usually a blink-and-you'll-miss-it affair to confirm my request and check whether I was the only one inside, now seemed to drag on interminably.

My pleas for haste were raw screams with the last dredges of air remaining in my lungs into the sterile environment of the elevator.

The world outside narrowed to a terrifying focal point as a guard closed the distance, their weapon trained on me. Time slowed as the doors began their usual rapid journey to closure, now seeming painfully slow instead.

Just as the guard's face became clear, the doors snapped shut, cutting off the deadly aim pointed right at my head.

Collapsing onto the elevator floor, my body wracked with pain, I surrendered to deep, ragged breaths, cradling my wounded calf and side. Tears streamed down my face, the adrenaline that had fueled my escape now retreating, leaving behind a severely vulnerable, exhausted and freely sobbing mess...