

Chapter 183 - Financials

The silence that followed Takeda-san's words lasted about two seconds before Kaito let out a short sound that was either a cough or a laugh and *might* even have been both.

"Fair assessment," Reina said flatly.

Higgins, for his part, looked at Takeda-san with the expression of a man who had been genuinely uncertain what he was going to find on the other side of that door and had just received an answer that landed somewhere *considerably* better than his worst-case projection.

"You're not exactly winning any beauty competitions yourself right now, Takeda-san," he said with an easy smile.

In reply, Takeda-san's mouth moved in a way that was probably intended as a dry, shit-eating grin and arrived as something fairly asymmetrical but still somewhat recognizable in spirit.

I definitely counted it, for one.

I was standing near the foot of the bed, hands in my jacket pockets, taking quiet stock of the room. The atmosphere in it had markedly shifted the moment Takeda had spoken—the held-breath of four people releasing who had been waiting to find out what they were dealing with, finally getting a data point they could work with.

It didn't exactly fix anything, of course.

But knowing that Takeda's humor was still in-tact was a very strong indicator that there hopefully wasn't too much gone.

Higgins, meanwhile, let the moment breathe for another few seconds, then settled a large portion of his weight onto the crutch and straightened slightly.

"Alright," he said. "We need to talk about where we go from here. All of us. Because there are decisions to make and I'd rather make them together than—"

Takeda grimaced and it visibly got worse with every word.

Higgins stopped mid-sentence, looking at him, concern visible on his face.

Takeda exhaled slowly, then spoke up.

"I am... having trouble." He stopped, brows furrowing, then tried again. "The words. They are... not..."

He made a short, frustrated sound and pressed his lips together, jaw tightening.

Then he let out a long, *heavy* breath through his nose.

It was one of those resetting sighs that everyone knew from personal experience, when things were *really* pissing you off, but you weren't going to voice that out loud at this moment.

And then he switched.

"{It's easier like this,}" he said, and even in Nighon the edges of his words were softened, the cadence slightly uneven—but the difference was *very* obvious. "{Common is... difficult right now. The words don't come where I reach for them. In here—}" he touched his temple briefly "—it's there. By the time it gets out, it's wrong.}"

Higgins nodded slowly.

I arranged my face into the expression of someone following approximately none of this—the same one I'd been running since the first time I'd met them at the OPN, fine-tuned across the car ride to and from the gig, and now deployed again with the minor adjustment of someone who had been following a conversation and then abruptly hadn't been.

A [Deception] application so low-effort at this point that it barely registered as one, which made me fairly confident in its efficacy.

Higgins looked at me briefly, then back to the rest of the crew.

"{I'll translate,}" he said, then switched back to common and turned back towards me. "He said common is giving him difficulty right now. The words are there *internally* but something's disrupting the transfer. Nighon is easier—the damage seems to be sitting differently relative to his first language."

"Got it," I said with a grateful nod.

Then I looked at the configuration of the room—Higgins on the crutches, Reina leaned against the wall, Kaito holding his own weight with gradually improving conviction, Takeda in the bed, and me standing at the foot of it all like a slightly unnecessary appendage—and made the practical calculation.

"Actually," I said, "I don't have much real input here. This is crew business and *you four* are the crew. I was just the plus-one for this last gig."

I found the visitor's chair sitting unused near the far wall and moved toward it, lowering myself into it with the careful negotiation my ribs currently required for any transition between positions.

"I'm happy to help—genuinely—and I'm very much in favour of doing something about the Scrapwrights and whoever put that gig on the OPN—but you four don't need me in the middle of this conversation making everything take twice as long. Figure out what you want to do. Higgins can catch me up after."

Higgins looked at me with an expression that took me a moment to identify as grateful—not effusively, just the clean relief of a man who had been quietly calculating how to handle the translation problem and had just had it resolved without him having to raise it.

Whether he didn't want the administrative inconvenience of translating everything twice, or whether he didn't want to translate in front of Takeda-san in a way that underlined the man's difficulty communicating in his second language every few minutes—I wasn't sure.

'Probably both though... In vastly different proportions.'

"I'll update you after, then," he said. "Thank you, Ela-san."

I nodded, settled back in the chair, and stared at the nearest wall, pulling up my cerebral interface for no other reason than to appear like I was doing things—my eyes turning blue as I did so.

Then the conversation shifted to Nighon and I listened to every word of it.

Not intentionally, of course—or that was the story I was telling myself, anyway.

The truth was that the option to tune it out had never really been on the table, because I understood Nighon and had understood it since before I'd had any particular reason to not pretend otherwise, yet the habit of *not* volunteering that information had calcified into something I hadn't found a good moment to reverse yet.

The golden opportunity had simply never arrived, then more things had happened, and now I was sitting in a visitor's chair in a Ripper's backroom pretending to look at *something* while four people held a very private conversation in a language they believed I couldn't follow.

It wasn't my finest professional moment, but there really wasn't an easy way around it at this point.

"{The Ripper's fees are going to be substantial.}" Higgins said, establishing the frame of the conversation with the directness of someone who had already run the numbers and wanted everyone else running the same ones. "{I need to know where we actually are, financially. Honest numbers, everyone.}"

What followed was the specific, slightly painful exercise of four people laying out their *actual* financial positions to each other, which was the kind of conversation that tended to reveal things about a crew that the day-to-day working relationship kept comfortably obscured.

Reina went first.

The number she gave was lower than I would have guessed, though she delivered it without apparent embarrassment—the flat matter-of-factness of someone who had made deliberate choices about where her money went and was comfortable with the reasoning even when the total itself was uncomfortable.

Kaito's number was lower still, which he attributed in approximately four words to the cybernetic forearms, which I gathered had been recently upgraded and had taken a *significant* bite out of his reserves—if not the entire crew's.

'Cybernetics arms like that aren't exactly cheap...'

Takeda-san's contribution came slowly, the Nighon helping but not eliminating the effort entirely, and landed somewhere in the middle of the range.

Higgins totalled it without further commentary: Less than eight hundred Credits, combined.

For a crew that had, between them: A high-quality katana, two heavy pistols, a surprisingly solid car that was now a crumpled write-off against a fourth-layer apartment building, and a set of cybernetic arms that were definitely not on the absolute low-end of things.

All of it had apparently been purchased at the cost of running their operating reserves down to a margin that left very little room for the current situation, which, in-turn, had similarly arrived with very little consideration for their margin.

It was also, I realized with a slight bit of trepidation, the *exact* same logic that I'd been applying in Misha's shop, in the general store, and just about anywhere else I'd moved through since arriving in Neo Avalis: Buy the one thing that moves the needle, run lean everywhere else and then simply hope the needle moves fast enough before it comes to bite you in the ass.

'I might need to start saving up a bit of a nest-egg sometime soon here, to pay for Ripper and Slicer fees... I can't always rely on the Rest Function to get me fixed up. As my current situation is a damn good example of, huh...?'

"{Higgins needs a new leg,}" Reina led, with the directness of someone stating a logistical fact rather than a personal observation. "{Takeda-san needs...}"

She paused briefly. "{*Significant* intervention. And that's not including the Ripper's current bill.}"

"{I'm aware,}" Higgins agreed. "{We need a lot of Credits—and quickly.}"

"{So we need another gig. Or several,}" Kaito said. It was the most words he'd contributed to the conversation and they were, somewhat characteristically as far as I had pegged the guy so far, exactly sufficient.

"{We need several jobs, yes,}" Higgins said. "{Just a singular one that would pay enough, for how much we need would be far too dangerous in our current states... We also need to figure out what we're doing about the OPN listing and whoever opened it, too. Because I'm not letting that go either.}"

A murmur of agreement from the room, Takeda-san included.

Then Reina suddenly stepped forward, catching everyone's attention and said, with the particular emphasis of someone making a point they'd evidently been sitting on for quite a while, "{And we *need* First-Aid kits going forward. *Proper* ones, with actual tourniquets already in them—not the bare minimum shit we've been using.}"

She gestured as she said it—an animated, somewhat pointed gesture that took me a moment to process was directed at me. "{We can't simply hope that if we take another plus-one in the future, they will be as useful as her in that regard! I'm not going through

another fucking situation like this, simply because we didn't have the right equipment ourselves.}"

*'Well... I can't exactly ignore **that**, as somebody that doesn't speak the language. She's straight up pointing at me! Very animatedly, at that...'*

I raised an eyebrow at Higgins.

I received a direct message roughly a second later.

[Talking about acquiring First-Aid kits and such. I'll explain later.]

I looked up, found Higgins' eyes across the room, and gave a small nod of acknowledgement while carefully maintaining the expression of someone who had received a satisfying if incomplete summary and was content to wait for the rest.

Reina, meanwhile, was still talking, the gesture having apparently opened a longer point about equipment standards and crew preparedness that she'd had *strong* feelings about for a while now, and I watched her make her case to the room in a language I wasn't supposed to understand, about a topic she was gesturing *at me* to illustrate, somehow.

'Man, if she knew that all my equipment was basically cobbled together and I have no fucking idea what I'm actually doing... She'd be so upset.'

I looked back at the wall and re-opened the cerebral interface.

*'I **really** have to find a good moment to mention the Nighon thing at some point...'*

The moment just kept not arriving...

—

The conversation ran for another half-an-hour after that, moving in the particular circles that discussions moved in when the problem was large enough that every single proposed solution immediately generated three new problems.

It landed, eventually, on two things: File an official complaint and reimbursement request with the OPN—which, if it paid out the way Higgins was projecting, would hopefully cover Dex's bill in full and potentially stretch to getting Higgins mobile on something functional even if it wasn't top-tier chrome, when combined with the rest of their savings—and then run low-risk gigs, consistently, with the three operational crew members, until they'd scraped together enough to address Takeda-san's situation.

I sat with that plan and tried, charitably, to find the version of it that held up under my far-more-pessimistic general viewpoint on the world at large.

'Low-risk gigs,' I thought, staring at the wall. 'Several dozen of them, at the very least. All three of you coming out clean every single time, no accidents, no intel gaps, no gig openers who "forgot" to mention that the target location was affiliated with a major Scav band.'

I let that sit for a moment, then sighed internally. *'Did you all forget that this gig was supposed to be fairly low-risk, too...?'*

The math wasn't mathing in my head.

The cumulative probability of running that many consecutive gigs without *something* going sideways, given Neo Avalis' general attitude toward plans, was the exact sort of number that looked worse and worse the longer you looked at it. And that was *before* accounting for the fact that they'd be down Takeda for all of those gigs.

'I really don't want to be the pessimist here, but they're not really thinking this through properly, are they...?'

But, ultimately, Higgins had said that he had *contacts*.

A network of people who could surface a reliable list of genuinely manageable work.

A medical facility that could handle the surgical complexity of Takeda's reconstruction at a price that wasn't Corpo-grade.

And when Higgins had proclaimed he had contacts, in the tone he'd used, the rest of the crew had let their objections settle—not because the concerns had been resolved in any meaningful way, but because Higgins apparently had a track record for this sort of thing that bought him that particular kind of trust from the crew.

For now, anyway.

I, however, had absolutely no doubt this conversation was going to be revisited. Probably more than once. And at increasing volume as the reality of the world and the timeline made themselves felt in practice.

But for now, the room had reached the fragile consensus that was reached when everyone was too tired and too hurt to keep arguing, and that was going to have to be enough.

Good timing, as it turned out, because Takeda chose that moment to speak up of his own accord for the first time.

"{Can I speak with Higgins alone, for a bit?}" he said, and Kaito and Reina gladly took the out for now.

Reina translated the request for me, and the three of us filed out into the corridor without any particular resistance from anyone involved.

I leaned against the wall outside and turned over the obvious question—whether to ask for a summary of what had been discussed in there—and then turned it back over and put it down.

The thing was, I didn't *really* want to know.

Not because the information this would reveal wasn't useful, and not because I wasn't curious about it, but because asking for a translation meant getting a version of events that had been filtered through someone else's judgement about what I needed to know.

And somewhere underneath that practical objection was a quieter, more specific one that I was less comfortable examining directly.

'I don't want to find out whether they'd lie to me or not,' I thought. 'Because I actually kind of like these people.'

Which was, objectively, an odd position to be in.

I had a mechanism—sitting right there, completely available with no way to trace it back to me for anyone—for stress-testing *exactly* how much these people trusted me in return.

All I had to do was ask for the translation and see what version I got back.

It was so simple and clean, that it was hard not to just go for it.

Except that *knowing* they'd lied, if they had, was a door I couldn't un-open, once I knew.

And right now, on the other side of a gig that had nearly killed *all* of us and had cost two of them in ways that were likely going to take a long time to come back from—if ever—I found that I didn't *want* to go looking for reasons to trust them less.

So I stayed in the corridor with Kaito and Reina, and we didn't talk about anything in particular, each of us doing whatever private version of recovering we had available to us in a hallway outside a Ripper's backroom.

Reina had found the wall opposite Takeda's door and was using it with her eyes closed, head tilted back. Kaito had located a section of wall further down that he was also leaning against, and appeared to be somewhere between awake and not.

I, meanwhile, sat on the floor with my back against the wall and my knees up and let my brain do whatever it needed to do, which turned out to be not very much at all for once.

'Man, not having the Rest Function is so ass... Is this really what living used to feel like? Just constantly tired, in perpetual pain and just... exhausting? Fuck, man. I need to get the Anima Network back asap.'

Time passed in the comfortable, formless way it did when nobody was asking anything of it.

Then Higgins' voice abruptly rose from inside the room.

It lasted a few seconds, dropped back to inaudible, then rose again briefly before settling into something we couldn't parse through the door.

Reina had opened her eyes and Kaito's head had also come up, looking towards the door.

Then three three of us looked at each other. No words were exchanged.

We simply, *collectively*, pushed off from our respective sections of wall and moved a bit further down the corridor, putting enough distance between ourselves and the door that whatever was happening inside could happen without an audience pressed up against the frame.

We continued to wait.

Ten minutes, roughly. Maybe a few more.

Then the door finally opened and Higgins came out.

I looked up at him and immediately felt like I had been kicked in the gut.

I had seen Higgins in a crashed car. I had seen Higgins holding his side and firing over the hood of a vehicle while something in his chest was *clearly* registering strong objections. I had seen Higgins immediately post-surgery, propped against a hospital bed with one leg and a monitoring strip and the particular pallor of someone who had recently lost a *significant* quantity of blood.

None of those versions had looked even *slightly* as beaten up as this one.

Higgins looked back at me.

"Takeda-san wants to speak with you," he said.

Every set of eyes in the corridor landed on me simultaneously.

I blinked. "Me?"

"You."

"What about?"

Higgins considered the question with what appeared to be genuine uncertainty rather than deflection. "Honestly? I'm not entirely sure."

He shifted his weight on the crutch, something moving briefly across his expression that I couldn't fully read. "But I have things to discuss with Reina and Kaito, so the timing works out."

I decided to take the hint.

"Right," I said, and pushed off the wall.

The room was quieter than it had been with five people in it, which was obvious in theory and yet somehow more pronounced in practice than one would have imagined.

I closed the door behind me and crossed to the bed, and felt Takeda's eyes find me the moment I cleared the threshold.

The same eyes. The same quality of attention—that particular, unhurried, unbelievably thorough scan I remembered from the OPN bar, which had been approximately a day ago by any objective measure and felt, by every other one, like it belonged to a different chapter of my life entirely.

It had been fairly unsettling back then.

It was something entirely different now, and I couldn't even immediately name why.

I stopped at the bedside and met his gaze.

He looked at me for a long moment—long enough that I had time to notice the asymmetry still present in his face, the lean in his posture, the evidence of *everything* sitting behind those eyes that was still intact and operational even with the housing in its current state.

Then he said, in Nighon, "{Let's have a chat, Ela-san.}"

Something heavy landed in my chest at that.

Not panic—which was the thing I would have expected, given my track record.

But panic didn't come for once.

What came instead was something quieter and stranger, something that felt almost like *relief*—like the particular ease of a secret that had been sitting heavily and had just found somewhere to go. Like, in some way, I had always *known* that he probably knew.

Even though that made no logical sense whatsoever.

His eyes told me what I needed to know: There was no accusation in them.

There was something that sat closer to recognition, and underneath that, something that sat closer to respect—carefully held, not offered freely, but present in the way of something that had been earned without either of us discussing the terms.

I held his gaze and replied in Nighon that felt, coming out of my mouth in this room, more natural than it had any right to.

"{About what, Takeda-san?}"

Something happened to his face upon hearing my reply.

The asymmetry was still there, the evidence of everything the crash and the aftermath had done to the architecture of him still very much present and legible.

But the grin that spread across it anyway was large, genuine and reached all the way to his eyes, which had gone from carefully evaluating to openly, warmly delighted in the space of a single exchange—the specific delight of a man who had made a wager with himself and just found out he'd been right.

"{*Bushido*.}" he simply said and his grin turned almost feral...