

Interlude 180.75 - Checkup

PoV: Reina Yamamura

Reina had never been good at waiting.

It wasn't a patience problem, exactly—she could hold a position for hours without moving, had done it more times than she could count and would do it again without complaint if the situation called for it.

That kind of waiting had a *purpose*, had a sight line, had something at the end of it that her hands could directly contribute to and her brain could understand.

This kind of waiting was *different*.

This was the kind where there was nothing to aim at and nothing to fix and no wire to run or barrel to clean, just four people in four beds in various states of horrifically mangled and the low, medicinal hum of a Ripper's backroom doing its quiet, expensive work on people she knew.

'I hate this... I fucking hate this...'

The Ripper's place was called *The Sutured Sparrow*, which was either poetic or pretentious depending on your mood, and was run by a man named Dex Okafor who had the specific energy of someone who had chosen a very violent profession and found it genuinely soothing.

He was a small man—compact in the way that likely still made him the same weight as people several heads taller than him—with quick, certain hands and the habit of narrating everything he did in a low, continuous murmur that wasn't quite directed at the patient and wasn't quite directed at himself.

Just sound, filling the workspace, like he needed the auditory texture to think clearly or something similarly nonsensically “artsy”, Reina guessed.

He also kept a single, slightly battered wind-up music box on the corner of his primary workbench that he'd restart every time it wound down, without interrupting whatever he was currently doing, the same handful of notes cycling through the room at irregular intervals throughout the night.

It should have been annoying.

Yet... Somehow it wasn't. Somehow it was the most normal thing in the whole damn place.

Reina sat in the chair beside Kaito's bed and continued to look at the ceiling for a while.

Of the four people she had managed to drag out of the foyer, Kaito was probably the closest thing to fine that any of them were going to be for the foreseeable future, which was a low bar that he was nonetheless clearing.

The Ripper had told her “heavily medicated—blood loss,” and nothing else, with the clipped brevity of a man who'd delivered that particular two-word summary enough times that expanding on it had stopped seeming worth the effort.

Which meant, to Reina, that the blood loss had been bad enough to justify the *heavily* part of “heavily medicated” and not much else needed saying about it.

His color was better than it had been in the foyer, at least. His breathing was even, too.

He looked, from a distance, like a man who had simply decided to sleep and was doing it without drama, which was more than Reina could say for any of the others.

She watched him for a moment, then looked at her own arm in its sling for a while, then looked back at Kaito and sighed heavily.

The gig had been supposed to be a straight clear-and-sweep.

The OPN listing had been clean, the location had been mapped, and Higgins had done his pre-job workup the same way he always did—thorough, cross-referenced, the kind of preparation that had kept this crew in positive territory for over three years running without a single job going properly sideways.

Except this one *had* gone sideways in the specific, catastrophic way that sideways could go when the intel had a hole in it big enough to drive a whole damn car through.

‘Fucking Scrapwrights... Why them, of all Gangs? Scrapwrights, Scrapwrights, Scrwaprights...’

She turned the word over with the flat anger of someone who'd had several hours to let it all settle and yet hadn't found a more comfortable position for it anywhere.

The safehouse they'd cleared had been *Scrapwright*, she knew now—had been one of their operation points, or safehouses or something of the sort—staffed by a splinter group small enough and far enough from central operations that it hadn't shown up in any of the standard gang-affiliation sweeps.

Or that was the charitable read, anyway.

The less charitable read was that whoever had opened the gig on the OPN had very well known *exactly* what they were listing and had made the calculation that the clearers' problem wasn't their problem.

‘Fucking piece of shit blanks... The whole chain of them, from the opener down...’

She was going to have thoughts about that, once Higgins was in a condition to have the conversation. About how to proceed. About what a crew was owed when a job listing was missing the detail that the targets had several armed backup crews within three blocks.

First, though, Higgins had to be in a condition to have the conversation.

She stood up from the chair next to Kaito's bed, and went to find out what condition that was.

The room Dex had put Higgins in was the one at the back, the one with the better equipment.

Reina stood in the doorway for a moment before she went in because she'd learned a long time ago that some things were worth taking a breath before you looked at them directly.

Then she went in.

Higgins was out—properly *out*, the deep chemical unconsciousness of serious post-operative sedation, his face slack in the way that faces went when the brain had been given explicit instructions to stop processing for a while.

The monitoring strip on his wrist was running a steady readout that Reina couldn't fully parse but that was green in enough places to mean the worst wasn't happening right now.

'Small mercies...'

Her eyes instinctively went to the blanket like it had many times already.

The outline of a man in a bed had a specific geometry to it, and Higgins' simply didn't match.

The left side did what it was supposed to.

The right tapered out just shortly past the hip and didn't come back.

Reina stood there and looked at it for a long moment, jaw set.

"The femoral artery," Dex had told her, with the same low murmur he used for everything.

Hit clean, high on the thigh, the kind of wound that had a very specific and very non-negotiable timeline attached to it if nothing intervened.

Reina had intervened, of course—had gone straight for her wire-rope in the chaos of the foyer's aftermath, gotten a constriction point above the entry site before the blood loss had moved from critical to zero, then made sure to hold it until Dex's table had taken over the job.

Dex had said she'd saved his life.

'I didn't fucking save anything now, did I...?'

She felt like she was looking at a blanket that was flat where it shouldn't be and running the math on every decision point between the start of the foyer breach and the moment the bullet had found Higgins' leg.

There had been a Scav with the real gun.

She'd clocked him the moment he had fired the first time—had clocked that the stakes had gotten quite a bit higher immediately, the sound of it different from the makeshift noise that had been the consistent texture of the fight up until that point.

She'd clocked it and she'd been mid-motion, mid-firing line, mid-*something* that had needed to be completed before she could redirect—or so she had told herself in that moment. The half-second between clocking that change and redirecting had been where Higgins had stepped into the line.

'Should've gone for him first...' The thought had been running the same circuit since the drop from the window into the alley. *'Should've tried... Could've done it, if I tried...'*

Except she hadn't been able to see him clearly.

Except trying and missing would have been worse than not trying.

Except the foyer had been a disaster of bodies and debris and close-quarters chaos that her usual accuracy couldn't fully account for.

She *knew* all of that, of course. The logic held up.

The blanket *still* didn't.

Reina hadn't been able to find the first-aid kit the strange girl had been using in the immediate aftermath, and so the wire-rope had been the tool available and she'd used it.

Dex had said it was enough to make the difference, and yet somehow that still didn't close the circuit inside Reina's head.

What closed the circuit was simple: Higgins had lost a leg.

Whatever chain of decisions and half-seconds and available tools had produced that outcome, the outcome was the outcome.

She pulled the chair from the corner of the room and sat down beside the bed, elbow on knee, her good hand resting against her jaw. Then her eyes went back towards Higgins, watching his shallow breath slowly lift his chest again and again.

The lung damage was the other thread, the one that didn't exactly have a clean endpoint yet.

The crash had done *something* to Higgins' chest, ribs and whatever else was in there, and the sprint he'd made back toward the foyer at the first sounds of renewed combat had asked things of a compromised respiratory system that a compromised respiratory system hadn't been built to give.

Dex had been cautious about the long-term read on it.

"Cautious," in Dex's vocabulary, meant he wasn't willing to commit to a number yet, which meant the number was still not fully settled—which was almost never a good thing, in Reina's experience.

'New lungs... Probably chrome. Or a biograft if we can source it, somehow. Do we have any contacts for that...?'

Either way, the kind of credit expenditure that required a run of solid, well-paying gigs executed without incident, which was the specific resource they were currently shortest on.

She looked at the monitoring strip.

Still green where it mattered.

The wind-up music box started again from the other room, the same small sequence of notes cycling through the wall between them, as Reina sat with her arm in its sling, her jaw in her hand and didn't move for a long time, just staring at the thoroughly wrong outline of the blanket...

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Some amount of time later that she had no care in the world to know, Reina decided to check in on the last two members of the crew.

Takeda-san's room was across the hall from Higgins'.

The first thing she always noted when she came in here—and she'd been in enough times by now that the word always definitely applied—was the blanket as well.

Once again, the outline of it.

The way it laid properly shaped across the bed in the complete, uninterrupted geometry of a man whose limbs were where they were supposed to be.

Unlike the room across the hall...

She pulled the chair over and sat down, and looked at Takeda-san's face for a moment, and tried not to think about it. Tried, and didn't particularly succeed, because the thought was right there and had been right there every time she'd crossed this threshold.

'Takeda-san's arm is fine because Ela-san got to him first...'

That was it. That was the whole explanation.

*'Not some stupid wire-rope. Not some wholly improvised blank-shit. Not anything I did—Ela-san's kit, Ela-san's skills, Ela-san knowing **exactly** which artery was doing what and exactly what to do about it. Clean sutures. Proper compression. A tourniquet that had held until Dex's table could take over...'*

Takeda-san had not lost his arm. Higgins had lost his leg.

The difference between the two was simply who had done the first-aid.

'What a fucking petty thing to whine about...'

She knew that.

The outcomes weren't a competition and nobody had been keeping score and the variables between the two situations had been *completely* different—different injuries, different timing, different tools available in different moments.

She *knew* all of that.

Yet it still sat in her chest like something with an edge to it—the two blankets in the two rooms, the contrast between them direct and visible, doing a number on her that clean logic alone wasn't going to touch.

Like she'd personally taken Higgins' leg off herself.

Her doing, *her* hands, nobody else's.

'Faster,' she thought weakly. 'Should've been faster. Should've gone looking for the kit instead of the stupid wire-rope—it was somewhere in that debris, I just didn't fucking find it in time...! Defaulted to what was already in my hands instead of just looking harder.'

Her jaw tightened. *'And the blank-ass Link upgrade... If I'd put those Creds into a proper med-kit instead—one with a real tourniquet and all the things Ela-san had, one that didn't need improvising on the fly—'*

She stopped herself dead, looking up at the ceiling and taking a deep breath. Then she pulled her attention back to the room, to Takeda-san's face, to the monitoring strip running its quiet readout on his wrist.

The Ripper had not been optimistic.

Dex had said it all in the same low murmur he said everything in, which made it land softer than it deserved to. *"Too much blood loss. Internal cranial pressure sustained for too long."*

The kind of damage that the brain accumulated quietly during the window between injury and intervention.

He'd been very careful not to put a number on it. Careful, again, meaning the number wasn't one that had fully settled and thus, he didn't want to say out loud.

Takeda-san had a very real chance of not waking up again—ever.

And here Reina was, sitting in the chair beside his bed, running the same useless loop about Higgins' leg and her own inadequacy, while the man in front of her had a very real and very present probability of never opening his eyes again.

She looked at him and felt the anger arrive—not hot or sharp, but the deep, grinding kind that had nowhere useful to go.

The unfairness of it was almost making her physically sick.

Takeda-san was not a man who should've been taken out by something stupid like internal bleeding in the brain.

He was the kind of man who put down two Scavs before most people had registered the door was open. Who had been a master of the sword for more years than Reina had even been alive. Who had been in this city, in this line of work, for long enough that he should've

had enough scar tissue—literal and otherwise—to simply *not* be felled by something as blank-ass mundane as blood pressure on the wrong side of his skull.

This was Neo fucking Avalis.

This was a city with chrome that could replace entire limbs overnight, with biografts that could rebuild organ systems from a cellular baseline, with gene-tech that could rewrite the body's own instructions if you had the right Ripper and the fitting budget.

The infrastructure for fixing this *had* to exist. Somewhere in Neo Avalis, at this exact moment, there was a solution to the problem lying in the bed in front of her.

'Credits,' she inevitably thought. 'It always comes down to fucking Credits and nothing else. Higgins' leg. His lungs. Whatever chrome or biograft or specialist gene-fuckery it'd take to sort out whatever's happening inside Takeda-san's skull right now—all of it exists, somewhere in this city. All of it just has a price tag...'

Credits they didn't have.

Coming off a gig that had paid out nothing and taken *everything*, the crew distributed across four beds in a back-room Ripper's shop with a tab that was climbing by the hour.

'Get the Credits,' she made herself think, doing her best to pull the spiral into a line. 'Get the Credits, Higgins gets the contacts, it all gets fixed. In that order. That's the sequence. Just gotta get the Credits and it can all be fixed...'

It didn't make her feel any better. Not really. But it was something to aim at, and Reina had always done better with a target than with nothing at all.

She looked at Takeda-san's face, at the even, medicated stillness of it, then took a deep breath and left the room—there was one more person she had to check on.

She stood outside Ela-san's door for a long moment before finally going in—same as the last two times.

The hesitation wasn't something she'd been expecting when she'd first developed it, and it wasn't something she particularly liked about herself now that she had.

Reina didn't hesitate. It wasn't even in her vocabulary—usually.

But *something* about the... *girl?* on the other side of that door produced it anyway. It did so every single time now, and she'd stopped pretending otherwise.

She pushed the door open and leaned against the frame without fully committing to entering.

Ela-san was out—same as the others, except not sedated. The Ripper had considered it, but made the call that it wasn't necessary as she wasn't naturally awake anyway.

'She looks so much smaller just lying on the bed like that...'

Reina looked at her and tried—not for the first nor the last time—to figure out *what exactly* she was even looking *at*.

When Higgins had brought her in at the start of the gig, Reina's first read had been simple, immediate and, she'd been fairly confident at the time, *accurate*: Corpo brat.

The hairstyle alone was enough—VoniX-Black wasn't exactly cheap, and whoever was doing the neon-cyan on top of it was just asking for trouble. Nobody living with any real proximity to getting shanked in the streets by blank-ass Scavs on a daily basis chose hair that required that kind of *maintenance* budget.

And that wasn't even talking about the damn gear: Full Pseudo-Tier 1 across the board, solid DuraPack, everything fitting with the particular correctness of equipment that had been *selected* rather than obtained and accumulated over time.

All that with just a single gig on her Operator record. *One*.

That was the *entire* professional history Ela-san had shown up with.

'Corpo-plant, or Corpo Scion wanting a taste of something grittier than their usual circuit...'

The read had been clean.

Reina had been absolutely *sure* of it.

She'd agreed to the addition anyway, because Cryo-san's recommendation wasn't a thing that happened often—barely happened at all, if she was being more precise about it—and that carried weight even when everything else about the picture was making her raise an eyebrow or two.

Nothing about Ela-san had been directly odd, however. Nothing that screamed Corpo-adjacent, at the very least. Just... inexperienced in a way that felt odd, given Cryo-san's recommendation and her overall getup.

The quick-hacks assembled in the car on the way to the gig—not necessarily a red flag on its own, but carrying the specific energy of someone who hadn't thought that far ahead until the last possible moment.

The whole elevator situation, which Reina *still* thought about with a specific, flat disbelief.

'A Runner who can't handle an elevator...? What kind of Runner has "nothing for elevators"...? What kind of Runner got into a crew with Cryo-san without encountering one that needed hijacking? In Neo fucking Avalis?!'

Yet then, *somehow*, the same exact Runner had gone into damn *Cyberspace* on a whim and come back with a complete internal map of the safehouse—exact layout, full headcount, positions on every Scav in the unsecured areas, no alarms tripped at all.

The kind of Cyberspace work that other Runners usually charged *serious* Creds for and still botched around half the time.

None of the basics. All of the ceiling.

The math didn't work and Reina had turned it over enough times by now to be confident that it wasn't going to start working if she just looked at it from a different angle.

And then came the fighting...

*'I mean... I definitely know **why** she did it,'* Reina thought, leaning a little more weight against the doorframe.

She'd seen *the look*—had clocked it even through Ela-san's best effort at keeping it contained: The jitter behind the eyes.

The particular feverish quality of someone running on something that wasn't purely adrenaline, something that went a level deeper than that and had opinions about violence that a well-adjusted person simply *didn't*.

'She's got some serious issues up there...'

The kind that tended to either get people killed *very fast* chasing the Dragons, or turn them into living legends—usually the first, in Reina's experience.

But, then... the smoke room situation had come up.

Where Ela-san had thrown *metal balls* through a wall—with her *bare hands*.

A *real* fucking wall—not the decorative partition nonsense that passed for interior architecture on the lower layers, but an *actual wall*, the kind that Reina would've a running start and probably a sacrifice of several bones in her body to put holes through.

Yet Ela-san had simply *thrown* a handful of metal balls through it—without any kind of apparent bionic or cybernetic enhancement.

The outlines that followed were a big oddity, too.

Accurate, real-time positional data on targets through solid material—which, fine, there's definitely more than a few tools that can do that. What she *couldn't* accept about that whole thing was the part where Ela-san had just left the balls in the room afterward.

She'd collected whatever was easy to grab, but otherwise didn't even bother to look for them.

Tools that were supposedly *highly* specialized for *exactly* this usage, custom-made for this *specific purpose*, and the girl had walked away from them without a second glance.

'You don't just leave your tools... Not if they're actually what you said they were.'

She touched the one still sitting in her jacket pocket through the fabric, the small dense weight of it rolling under her fingertip.

Reina wasn't a Runner. Didn't pretend to understand half of what Runners did with their tech, and didn't particularly want to.

But she understood when a story had a structural problem, and the magnetized explanation had been absolutely *riddled* with them in hindsight.

'*Magnetized my ass,*' she thought, same as every other time the memory had come up in the past few hours. '*I even checked... They're not magnetic at all. Not even slightly.*'

Secrets were part of the trade, of course.

She'd extended that much professional courtesy and planned to let it sit there.

What she couldn't extend the same courtesy to—what had been living rent-free behind her eyes since the moment it happened—was the stuff inside the foyer.

The lock was where it had started.

Whatever Ela-san had done to the door, the specific *wrongness* of watching metal simply get cut by... *nothing* had hit Reina somewhere instinctive before her conscious mind had really found an explanation for it.

Higgins had felt it too, she knew.

She'd seen it in the look he'd thrown her, half a second, no words shared because there wasn't time—the look of two people who'd clocked the same thing and filed it under “*deal with later*” because the situation wasn't giving them a choice.

The memory of it made her feel like she was standing at the lip of something with no visible bottom yet still feeling the pull of it before you'd decided whether to step back... It was beyond odd.

The last moments, after Ela-san had pulled out Takeda-san's katana, though...

Reina had gone prone the instant the warning had left Ela-san's mouth—purely on instinct, on the tone of it, the kind of tone that her hindbrain had instinctively decided to treat as authoritative without consulting the rest of her—and she was damn glad that she had.

She *still* had no words for what had followed.

She'd *tried* to find them several times since then and come up empty every time.

The *screech* of air that had peaked past the point of being a sound... The sensation of the world pulling in every wrong direction at once... The pictures in her head of what the foyer had looked like afterward—the debris, the clean cuts in the rockcrete that shouldn't even have been possible, the red that was distributed across every remaining surface with a thoroughness that left no ambiguity about what had been standing in the arc's path...

'*Ela-san saved all of our lives...*' Reina knew that.

She held it as a fact, clean and unambiguous, separate from everything else that she felt.

Yet that fact wasn't going to help her sleep.

She looked at the person lying on the bed—the small, still shape of her, the corpo haircut and the face that looked younger than it had any right to look given the things it had apparently been attached to this evening—and stayed in the doorway a while longer, turning the metal ball over in her jacket pocket without taking it out.

She still didn't have the faintest category for what Ela-san actually was—was starting to think she wasn't going to find one either.

'Runaway Corpo Scion...? Definitely not a plant, at least... Some sort of black-site project gone rogue? What the fuck are you...?'

Her thoughts were interrupted by a low groan coming from the bed.

Before Ela-san's eyes could flutter open, Reina had already disappeared back into the corridor, letting the door close quietly behind her.

She'd decided in that very moment that this wasn't her job; she'd get the Ripper.

'Not to mention, this is very much a Higgins problem to solve... Please wake up soon, you fucking blank. Don't make me deal with all of this—it's not what I'm good at...'