

Chapter 106 - Deal

[System]: *[Serenity] Perk activated successfully.*

[System]: *[Serenity] Perk has cleansed User of 2x Negative Ailments, 1x Poison, 1x Heavy Haemorrhage, 4x Medium Haemorrhage, 7x Light Haemorrhage, 37x Internal Haemorrhage.*

Reading through the rundown from the System as I struggled to piece myself back together, I couldn't help but silently thank past-Sera for picking this Perk all those weeks ago.

[Serenity] hadn't exactly been useful so far, considering it completely failed me during the whole NeuroCorpse incident, but right now? Right now, it was the only reason I wasn't dead.

Breathing was still a monumental challenge—each inhale felt like dragging air through a crushed straw. Not that I could feel much of anything. Whatever painkiller Jade had given me wasn't just numbing the pain; it was dulling *everything*.

My limbs, my face—hell, even my thoughts felt like they were moving through sludge.

But as long as I didn't move and kept my eyes shut, my shallow breaths were enough to keep me from slipping under again.

"Ela...?" Jade's voice was hesitant, thick with concern.

A part of me warmed at hearing it. She actually cared. I had spent so much time trying to figure out where I stood with her, if she saw me as an ally, a nuisance, or something else entirely. That panicked, broken plea from earlier? That had been undeniably *real*.

I grunted in response, unwilling to risk anything more.

Coughing was a death sentence when my ribcage was still a mess of fractured bone. I didn't even want to think about how many splinters were floating around inside me, waiting for the slightest movement to slice something vital open.

So, priority number one: Staying alive.

Priority number two: Figure out how the hell I was going to keep the System a secret from Jade, Misha... and whatever Ripper they just called in.

Because yeah, there was no hiding it.

I had just effectively forced my body to stop bleeding, without moving, while half-conscious, right in front of Jade's eyes.

There was no faking that.

There were definitely cybernetics out there that could explain what just happened—self-repair mods, advanced auto-injectors with clotting agents, maybe even some high-tier nano-tech—but I actually didn't *have* any of those.

And that fact was going to be painfully obvious the second the Ripper laid hands on me.

I really wanted to keep them from getting too involved, but I didn't have much of a choice.

While the Rest Function could fix me up, I wasn't delusional enough to think it would patch me up to full health in just eight hours.

It had already struggled to deal with netrunning burnout in one go, and that was nowhere near as bad as the mess I was in right now. My ribs felt like shattered glass, my entire torso was one giant wound, and I had no idea how much internal damage I was working with.

If I let the Ripper handle the worst of it first, though, then followed up with a full Rest, I had a much better chance of being at least 95% functional by the time Miss K's Dojo Session rolled around tomorrow.

That was the goal for now; I would figure out how to make up the missing hours for working on the Quick-Hack... *Somehow*.

Another issue that I was painfully aware of: Credits.

I didn't need to open my eyes to know that I was practically half-naked at this point.

The enforcer had done a number on my clothes, and the fact that I hadn't bled out before Jade hit me with the injector meant that someone—probably Jade—had used whatever scraps of my outfit were left to stop the worst of the bleeding.

At least, that's what I would have done in her place.

But a Ripper wasn't cheap, and I didn't exactly have a financial safety net for this kind of situation; not after just blowing most of my Credits on the backpack and Drone from Misha.

This wasn't a mission for Mr. Stirling either, where I could expect a payout or remuneration for my troubles, nor had I scored anything valuable that could be pawned off to cover the costs of new gear or medical treatment, like with the Pre-War Era gun the last time around.

The *only* thing I had walked away from this disaster with—aside from a boatload of experience, which I wasn't going to complain about—was the one weird anomaly in all of this: That random loot shard.

That alone was enough to distract me from my spiraling thoughts for the time being.

'*About that...*' I flicked through the System Interface, navigating to my inventory—the same one I had only seen once before, back when Kill Joy had walked me through Cyberspace.

Once there, I let the System decrypt the Data-Shard.

After everything that had just happened, I needed the dopamine hit of opening a loot box. Badly.

[System]: *Decrypting (Uncommon) Data-Shard #143... Success! Loot gained from Data-Shard needs to be claimed to be transferred.*

[==Uncommon Data-Shard #143 Contents==]

[1x Handheld Plasma Arc Torch]

[1x Handcuffs (Plasteel)]

[{c}48 Credits]

'Huh...?' My thoughts stalled as I processed the contents of the shard. 'The plasma torch will definitely sell for a solid amount of Credits if I don't end up using it myself, but... what the hell are plasteel handcuffs doing in here? Is this a fucking joke?'

This was only the second Loot-Shard I had ever found, and I hadn't expected them to be... this random.

I had been hoping for something useful—maybe another medical consumable like the Hypercoagulant from the Cyberspace shard, something that could actually help me crawl out of this mess.

Instead, I got handcuffs.

Plasteel ones, sure, which were worth a decent bit, but still.

*'I guess it's better than nothing... and plasteel **does** have value. Misha or some other vendor will probably buy them off me, even if they have no intention of reselling or using them. At worst, I'll break them down and sell the material...'*

I let out a slow exhale, deciding that while this wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping for, it was still a win in the long run. Credits were Credits, and a plasma torch could actually be useful.

Still, none of this helped me right now.

Pushing the loot aside for now, I turned my attention back to the far bigger problem at hand: My System was dangerously close to being exposed.

'Misha left the room at some point... That's one less person to worry about, at least for now. The real issue is Jade. How do I keep her from asking too many questions...?'

Then, without warning, a thought cut through my mind like a scalpel—cold, logical, utterly devoid of emotion and, most frighteningly of all, utterly *practical*.

"Slit her throat."

I felt ice flood through my veins, my body seizing up in shock.

'What?! No! What the fuck?!' My thoughts spiraled into sheer panic. 'Killing Jade?! Why the fuck would I even think that?!'

My eyes had opened wide and darted toward her on instinct, but thankfully, she was too preoccupied with sorting through the injectors to notice the sheer horror on my face.

I swallowed hard, my pulse pounding in my ears; almost causing a coughing fit.

That thought had *not* felt like my own. Not entirely, at least.

It had come from somewhere—some deep, detached part of me that didn't hesitate, didn't weigh morality or consequences. Just a cold, clinical efficiency that had whispered a solution to the problem before I even had time to process it.

I shut my eyes again, forcing myself to take slow, measured breaths—well, as slow and measured as I could manage with a likely punctured lung.

My mind was still racing, but I needed to *think*, to push past the knee-jerk panic and figure out what the hell had just happened.

It didn't take long for the answer to hit me.

My *Ego* Attribute was still engaged.

Or maybe it had re-engaged? It was hard to tell.

It felt like a lever stuck on “active,” even though I had lost consciousness at some point after flipping it on. A quick mental nudge told me I could shut it off again, much to my relief.

I almost did so immediately.

Almost.

But then, a thought—one that came instinctively, as if my mind was deliberately trying to keep me from making a fatal mistake.

‘Wait... if I turn my Ego off right now, I won't survive, will I?’

The realization settled over me like a weighted blanket—suffocating, but grounding.

The only reason I was even *functioning* right now, the only reason I wasn't outright spiraling, was because my Ego was keeping me stable. Keeping me *sane*.

It made too much sense.

I was too calm—*far* too calm—considering what had just happened.

I had taken two lives—one in the middle of a battle, the other with absolute, calculated precision—and yet, the fact barely registered.

It was just that: A fact; information. Like reading a stat sheet.

No guilt. No nausea. No shaking hands or horrified realization of what I had done.

Just a quiet, distant *understanding* that I had done it.

I was painfully aware that one of those deaths had been entirely avoidable too, if I had simply focused my Ego on something else than “kill”. If I had simply gone for “win” as my condition instead... But I felt no regret about it all.

Not yet.

But beneath all that? I could feel *it*, like a pressure just beyond the veil—an entire mess of emotions waiting for the moment my Ego let go. A dam holding back everything that should be hitting me right now.

If I flipped that switch, I was going to drown.

And I couldn't afford to drown right now—not with so much on the line, not with the sheer number of life-threatening issues still bearing down on me, and definitely not in front of Jade and Misha.

If I was going to break, it had to be on my own terms.

In the privacy of my own apartment. Somewhere isolated, away from anyone who might see just how ugly it was going to be.

Pushing the whole mess of thoughts about my Ego and everything I had done earlier aside was surprisingly easy—thanks to the very same Ego still being engaged.

I had wasted enough time already. Misha was bound to return with the Ripper any second now.

‘Ego, I need to fix this System issue. I can’t let anyone find out. Assist me.’

I pushed the thought through my mind with deliberate force, hoping that putting actual intent behind it would help flip my Ego's priorities.

Something shifted.

A faint jolt rushed through my body, like I had just licked a battery.

Weak, but distinct—like the tiniest shot of adrenaline.

I cracked my eyes open, immediately meeting the wide, startled gaze of Jade.

She was way too close, hovering inches from my face like she had been checking for signs of life. The second she realized I was awake, she flinched and practically scuttled backward.

“Help me sit...” I rasped out, every syllable dragged from my lungs like it cost me something.

Jade’s expression wavered between hesitation and outright disapproval. “Huh? Ehh... I don’t think that’s a good—”

I cut her off with an intent look.

Not a request.

“Right... okay... If you think it’s fine, I’m sure it’ll be fine...” she muttered, clearly not convinced. Still, she stepped back up to the table and cautiously wrapped her arms around me, bracing to help me up.

“If I’m hurting you, just say so, okay?” she whispered near my ear.

I grunted.

What I *wanted* to say was: “*Jade, you hit me with a painkiller that might as well be elephant tranquilizer—I can’t feel jackshit.*”

But talking was hard enough already, so I let her work in silence.

With an excruciating amount of careful maneuvering, she pulled me upright. I had no clue if that movement had reopened any wounds. No real way to check either, short of using *Serenity* again—but I didn’t have another minute to waste.

My eyes flicked to the pile of injectors at my side, my Ego subtly nudging my focus toward them.

‘Right... That’s probably the easiest way... Sorry, Misha.’

I tried lifting my hand toward the nearest injectors, but it felt like my arm was made of solid lead. Every movement was a battle, and I barely managed to get it a few inches off the table before it gave up on me entirely.

Luckily, Jade was paying attention.

“The injectors? Which one do you need?” she asked, already scooping up the two closest ones and holding them out for me to choose from.

Smart girl.

I locked eyes on the one in her left hand—a vial filled with an unsettling, toxic-green liquid. I stared long enough for her to pick up on my intention, and she quickly set the other one back down before placing the selected injector in my hand, her gaze tracking my every move with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

Here was the thing, though: I had *no fucking idea* what any of these injectors actually did. Nor did I have the time, energy, or luxury of figuring it out.

Didn't matter. That wasn't the point.

I wasn't going to *use* any of them, after all.

With the injector loosely in my grip, I lifted my arm as high as my battered body would allow... and then simply let go.

Clink.

The injector hit the table with a sharp sound, glass casing down.

Unfortunately, these things were *built* for in-field use. Which meant they were *stupidly* durable.

The glass didn't break.

"Oh shit," Jade yelled, immediately lunging to grab it from where it had landed. "Ela, let me help before you actually break it and spill whatever the hell this is everywhere..."

That... was *exactly* what I was trying to do, but there was no way I could explain it properly—not when every breath felt like I was trying to blow up a balloon with a melon-sized hole in it.

But trying to do this alone in a timely manner? Clearly not happening.

Jade came back with the injector still in her grip, her expression wary but willing. I locked eyes with her and mouthed my request as clearly as I could.

She frowned. "Huh? What?"

She leaned in closer, making it so I didn't have to speak up as loudly.

"Break vial. Spill on table. Don't tell."

Before she could react, my body convulsed, another coughing fit tearing through me like a damn earthquake. I barely managed to shove her back before I doubled over, spitting blood and bile onto the floor instead of all over her.

“Ela!” Jade’s voice spiked with panic, but I cut her off mid-fit with a sharp glare, my hand jerking weakly toward the injector.

She followed my gaze, her body going still.

Thinking. Processing.

‘Come on, Jade... You owe me this much.’

I was running on fumes, barely keeping my head above water, but the second she met my eyes again and nodded, relief crashed over me like a tidal wave.

“I don’t know *why* you want this,” she muttered, rolling the injector between her fingers before pulling out her vibroknife, “but I’ll play along... Just know that you *are* explaining this shit to me at some point, got it?”

I nodded. Fair deal.

She deserved an answer at *some* point—I just needed enough time to figure out which version of “truth” she’d actually believe.

Jade made quick work of the injector, pressing the vibroknife’s blade against the casing and applying just enough pressure to crack it open with a sharp *snap*.

She barely hesitated before giving me a final, searching look, silently asking if I was *absolutely* sure about this.

I met her eyes and gave the smallest nod I could manage, then watched as she smashed the pre-cracked casing of the injector onto the table, letting the toxic-green liquid spill beside me.

Despite the obvious risk speaking had already put me in, I forced my lungs to cooperate just long enough to get a little more out.

“Injector, stop bleed,” I rasped, my eyes locked onto hers with as much intensity as I could muster.

I needed her to *understand* without me actually spelling it out, cause I literally couldn’t—I was banking everything on her putting the pieces together herself.

Jade blinked, then her gaze sharpened with realization.

She nodded, running through it in her head before parroting it back.

“*Got it*. You woke up and told me to use this one on you. It stopped the bleeding, but you crashed out and flailed around, knocking the injector against the table and breaking it, spilling the rest of it everywhere.” She nodded again, this time more to herself than me. “Misha doesn’t know what they all do, so... That’ll work... I think.”

Her eyes darted down to the spreading mess of green liquid, tracking its slow advance across the table. She kept nodding, reassuring herself that the story made sense—until, suddenly, she stopped cold.

Everything about her stilled.

Her eyes widened. Her breath caught.

Then, she started frantically looking around, her gaze snapping from one spot to another with increasing urgency.

Finally, she met my eyes again, horror creeping into her voice.

“Ela... where... where did your blood go?”

‘*Fuck.*’ That was the first thought that shot through my head.

[Lightfoot] had done it again—sweeping away all traces of my existence, including the *liters* of blood I’d spilled on the way here and all over this table.

I’d been hoping, *praying* really, that Jade wouldn’t notice—that she’d be too caught up in covering for me to realize the full extent of what had just happened.

But of course, that was too much to ask.

It had been a *very* long shot from the start.

I barely had time to figure out how to handle this before the rapid *tap-tap-tap* of feet echoed from the other room—Misha was back.

And judging by the hurried footsteps behind her, she’d brought the Ripper with her.

Jade and I locked eyes. We both knew time was up.

No more scrambling for answers, no more covering tracks.

I let my body sink back onto the table, exhaling shakily before forcing out one final whisper.

“*Don’t* tell.”

The effort alone sent another jagged cough through my chest, but it didn’t matter anymore. I just *needed* Jade to understand.

The door practically exploded open a second later as Misha stormed in, dragging an older man behind her. His face was lined with age, his bald, tattooed head slick with sweat, and he looked *thoroughly* unimpressed with the situation he’d been yanked into.

“*Fix Ela!*” Misha commanded, pushing him toward me with all the frantic urgency of someone who *absolutely* would not take no for an answer.

Except... she was a Gryplik.

Which meant that what should’ve been a hard shove was more like a firm *nudge*—the kind a human wouldn’t even stumble from.

The old man barely moved, shooting Misha an irritated side-eye before turning his attention to me. He took me in with a slow, practiced scan before exhaling through his nose.

“Yeah, yeah. You look a *hell* of a lot better than I was made to believe, little lady.”

Jade jumped in immediately, talking a mile a minute.

“Ehh, I managed to wake her up with some epinephrine. She told me which injector to use and it stopped the bleeding! But she still has *so much* internal damage, and—”

The man held up a hand, effectively cutting her off. His expression didn’t shift—just the same deadpan ‘*I’m too old for this shit*’ look as he started peeling off the thick leather-like glove on his right hand.

Underneath, his entire forearm was a masterpiece of cybernetics—sleek, high-end, and fitted with *every* medical tool imaginable. Scalpels. Tweezers. A cauterizer. Even a set of vicious-looking shears that looked *way* too heavy-duty for medical work.

Jade took an instinctive step back.

“Hush, hush,” the man muttered, already stepping toward me. “Sit down, kid. And take the shopkeeper with you.”

He flicked his gaze toward Misha and Jade, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Stay out of my damn way while I work, and the little lady will be just fine.”

The irritation in his voice was plain as day—he’d been dragged out here expecting a dying patient, only to find me still *somewhat* functional. It must’ve been a letdown for someone in his line of work.

But he didn’t waste time complaining.

With a flick of his cybernetic fingers, he activated one of the many tools built into his arm, a blade sliding out with mechanical precision. The next thing I knew, my already-ruined clothes were being sliced away like they were made of paper, falling to the floor in tattered remnants.

It shouldn't have bothered me—hell, my outfit was shredded beyond repair anyway—but watching my very first Operator gear get absolutely *obliterated* like that still stung.

"You said you injected her with something," the Ripper asked, not even looking up as his hands prodded and pressed over my exposed torso with expert detachment.

"What did you give her?"

"I... I don't know, honestly! It was epinephrine and a painkiller, uh—*here!*"

Jade rushed forward, practically shoving the empty painkiller injector toward him.

Her eyes flickered to me for half a second—then immediately darted away, her face turning an unmistakable shade of pink as she found *literally anything else* to look at.

'Really, Jade...? This is really not the time to get flustered!' I thought, even as I already felt my Ego filtering out what should've been an extremely awkward situation.

The absolute hypocrite that I was.

Under *normal* circumstances, being completely bare on a table in front of Jade and Misha would've sent me spiraling into a pit of embarrassment, but thanks to my Ego still being in overdrive, the only thing on my mind was making sure the System stayed under wraps.

The Ripper, meanwhile, had no reaction whatsoever.

He just took the injector from Jade, gave it a quick glance, and let out a grunt of acknowledgment before turning back to his work, entirely unfazed.

"Painkiller's fine," he muttered. "Epinephrine's *probably* fine, assuming she didn't overload her heart, but based on the fact she's still awake and semi-lucid, she's *probably* not gonna drop dead from it."

He glanced left and right, frowning, then turned toward Jade with a look of pure exasperation. "Did you *clean up* in here? Where's the damn blood, girl? How the fuck am I supposed to know how much she lost if you went and scrubbed the place down before I got here?"

Jade stiffened, opening her mouth to respond, but the Ripper was already grumbling under his breath—something about "damn blanks" and "kids these days" and "irresponsible working conditions."

He waved her off before she could even attempt an explanation.

“Doesn’t matter now, does it? Whatever...”

He turned back to me, leaning in for the first time and locking eyes with me, his expression a mixture of professional scrutiny and mild amusement. “Hey there, little lady. You lost a *lot* of blood—no idea how much exactly, but looking at the state of you, it sure as fuck wasn’t a *small* amount. I’m gonna have to cut you open, see what kind of damage is hiding in that mess of a torso, make sure you’re not still bleeding out on the inside. You want more painkillers, or are you good?”

“Ok,” I rasped, barely able to force out the word, but doing my best to look as confident as humanly possible, given my current condition.

Whatever painkillers Jade had pumped into me had to be *ridiculously* strong, considering I hadn’t even *felt* the Ripper poking around earlier—despite knowing full well that my entire rib cage was *shattered*.

“Wonderful!” he said, flashing a big, toothy grin that honestly felt a little *too* eager for someone about to carve me open. If my Ego hadn’t been keeping my emotions on lockdown, I might’ve felt *just* a little uneasy about that.

A sharp metallic *snikt* cut through the tense silence, followed immediately by two horrified gasps—Jade and Misha, no doubt.

And then, the unmistakable sound of flesh being sliced open.

“Be *careful!*” Jade yelled, her voice sharp with panic.

The Ripper shot her a deeply unimpressed look, already working at lightning speed with his cybernetic tools. “One more time: *Shut up and sit down, kid*. I’ve been doing this longer than you’ve been *alive*—probably *three* times over—so how ‘bout you let me do my damn job?”

Pointing a scalpel-like finger at me with his other hand, he added, “She doesn’t exactly have *time* for a nice, clean cut. But rest assured, I’ll stitch up your girlfriend here all pretty like when I’m done, yeah?”

And then, just like that, he was elbow-deep in my insides.

“Huh,” he muttered, pausing mid-examination. “*That’s* more fucking like it... What the fuck happened to her, anyway? A borg mistake her for a ball on the road?”

He leaned in closer, eyes scanning my completely ruined rib cage and lung area with an almost academic curiosity.

“You’re lucky to be alive, little lady,” he continued, voice oddly casual given the context. “None of the shards hit your heart or any of the big arteries... Lungs are

completely fucked, but we can fix that. Heart would've been a bigger problem. Don't think I would've gotten to you in time if *that* had gone south."

He exhaled sharply and shook his head. "Whoever did this to you *really* wanted you dead and made sure it would hurt the whole way there, huh?"

I managed a weak grunt in response, which only made him chuckle.

"Heh... Probably wanna *dodge* next time," he mused, clearly amused by my predicament. "Can't count on getting this lucky *forever*—but hey, maybe you're one of those stubborn bastards that just refuses to die, who knows."

With a level of casual ease that only came from *decades* of practice, he started plucking out the jagged bone shards buried deep in my flesh, slicing away damaged tissue and shifting things back into place like he was just putting together a puzzle on a relaxing Sunday afternoon.

"Just keep lying down and relax, little lady," he said, voice smooth, almost lazy, as he worked. "I'll have you patched up in no time. Just let me work my magic, and you'll be *good as new*... Well, as close as you can get, anyway..."