

Chapter 18 - Emergency

At that instant, my heart plummeted like a stone tossed into a dark abyss. The mood shifted from anticipation to urgency, as if a switch had been flipped. His voice reverberated in my ears, snapping me into immediate action.

Forgetting the carefully rehearsed scene I'd planned, I bolted from my wheelchair, the miracle of my newfound mobility now meaningless in the face of Gabriel's distress. My steps were swift but shaky as I raced towards him, my mind racing through a mental list of emergency first-aid steps.

"Gabriel, hold on," I stammered, my voice tinged with a mix of fear and resolve.

Reaching him, I quickly assessed the situation; his grip was slipping on the kitchen wall, and his knees were buckling as if they could give out any moment.

I manoeuvred myself under his arm, trying to stabilise him and take some of the weight off his failing legs, despite my own less-than-stellar strength. My hands felt the wet warmth of his blood, and I could see his face was contorted in a grimace of pain and concentration.

"Just... just hold on a second," I said, before leaning him gingerly against the wall as support, while I bolted back to the wheelchair and rolled it over to him. The brief instant of attempting to steady him was enough to know that I'd never be able to get him to the nearby couch—not with my low Body Attribute.

"Sit down, Gabe," I ordered, my voice regaining a semblance of authority as my Ego Attribute started working overtime and forcibly calming down my frantic thoughts.

Gabe lowered himself onto the wheelchair with slow, shaky movements and groans of pain. The second he was fully seated, I immediately rolled the wheelchair over towards the couch with all the strength I could muster.

As we made our way towards the couch, my mind was a torrent of emotion and strategy.

What had happened? Who had done this to him? How could I keep him stable until we got professional medical help—or more importantly, was there even any professional medical help available?

My familiarity with the world of Neon Dragons had left me naively unprepared for the grim realities of civilian injuries. In the game, the player character was a walking medical marvel, armed with access to ripper docs, slicers, and a veritable smorgasbord of pharmaceutical miracles that could mend nearly any ailment.

But here, as Sera, those luxuries were fantasies.

I had no quick-dial to an underground doctor, no stash of high-grade medical nanobots. The idea of calling an ambulance, which might have seemed like a given—albeit an expensive one—in another life, was complicated here. Ambulance services weren't a simple dial away;

they required a specific kind of health insurance that I wasn't even certain we had, despite Valeria's corpo job.

It was a clear discrepancy between the game world and my own lived experience, and it left me grappling with a problem that had no easy answers.

Regardless of these problems, however, as I lowered him onto the cushions of the couch and raced for the first-aid kit in the bathroom, one thing was glaringly obvious: I had to act, and fast.

The gravity of the situation was overwhelming, yet strangely, I found a fragment of clarity in it: In that moment, our roles had abruptly reversed.

Gabriel, the usually unflappable guardian, needed *me*.

And though my heart was pounding with a mix of fear and adrenaline, I was resolute—I would *not* let him down.

I frantically retrieved the synth-bandage spray can I had used for my own forehead wound just days earlier. Kneeling beside Gabriel, I took a closer look at his injury.

A chillingly clean cut, several centimetres deep, stretched from his navel diagonally across his abdomen to his side. The wound was a ghastly sight and definitely intended to kill rather than to maim, underscoring the viciousness of the attack he had suffered.

My hand trembled as I aimed the spray can, but I steadied it with effort.

As I began administering the synthetic bandage to seal the gaping wound, a flurry of System notifications chimed in my mind, informing me of various Skill and experience gains. I dismissed them, uninterested and unfocused on anything but Gabriel's well-being.

Pressing the nozzle of the spray can, I coated the wound in a layer of the synth-bandage, watching as the material interacted with his skin, creating an instant adhesive seal.

My mind raced, pondering the possibility of internal injuries, of organs that might have been damaged in the assault. But for now, the external wound was sealed, and that would have to suffice as a starting point—I wasn't a doctor, after all.

It was a grimly inadequate substitute for proper medical care, but it was the best I could do under the dire circumstances.

Swiftly, I accessed my cerebral interface's messaging function, bypassing all other distractions to send an urgent message to Oliver.

The text read: [Gabriel is injured. Do we have med-evac insurance? What medical professionals do we know?].

I deliberately kept the message brief and to the point, avoiding any extraneous details that might slow Oliver's response to these critical questions. Time was of the essence, and clarity, not verbosity, was what was needed now.

Fortunately, Oliver was as attentive and caring as a father as I'd always perceived him to be; his rapid response all but confirmed it.

[No med-evac insurance. Slicer on the 26th floor: Maltrick. Deets are attached. Tell him Valeria will cover any and all costs.]

Wasting no time, and acutely aware that Gabriel was on the verge of losing consciousness due to blood loss and pain, I directed him towards the wheelchair. "Gabe, we're going to see Dr. Maltrick right now. Get in the chair," I ordered.

Gabriel, clearly disoriented yet sensing the urgency in my voice, managed to lift himself from the couch amid a symphony of pained moans and grunts. He then collapsed into the wheelchair, which emitted a disconcerting creak under his far more substantial weight—especially compared to my anorexic body.

Summoning every ounce of strength left in my already overworked muscles—still sore from my long day at Mr. Shori's stall—I propelled the wheelchair out the apartment door and down the seemingly endless hallway toward the nearest elevator.

As I navigated the corridor, my mind's cursor danced over the cerebral interface to fire off an urgent message to Dr. Maltrick, using the contact details Oliver had thoughtfully provided.

[Gabriel Vildea, stab-wound in abdomen, approximately 3-4cm deep. Heavy blood loss; wound temporarily sealed with synth-bandage. Currently en route to your clinic via elevator. Valeria Vildea will cover all expenses.]

I opted to forgo anonymizing my ID when sending the message.

It acted both as a digital signature and a badge of authenticity, a subtle assurance that my urgent communique should be taken seriously—given that my last name matched those mentioned in the emergency text.

By the time we had made it only halfway to the elevator, I was drenched in sweat, my breaths coming in ragged gasps. But halting wasn't an option—not when Gabriel's life hung in the balance.

I pushed onward, my ears straining to hear any sound from Gabriel, who had grown eerily silent. I could only hope that he had lost consciousness due to pain and blood loss, rather than something more ominous.

Just when I thought I couldn't go any further, a deep, concerned voice emanated from a few metres behind me. "Are you okay, little girl? Do you require assistance?"

Without pausing to identify the speaker, words burst forth from my lips: "Yes! To the 26th floor, now! He's dying!"

In an instant, a pair of chromed arms manoeuvred around me and gently moved me aside.

The stranger, built like a human mountain, began pushing the wheelchair at a velocity I couldn't have hoped to achieve.

"Dr. Maltrick, I assume?" the man's gravelly voice inquired as he effortlessly propelled the wheelchair ahead of him.

"Yes! He's been notified, please hurry!" On the brink of both mental and physical collapse, I trudged behind them, gulping down air in desperate mouthfuls, as the imposing figure guided the wheelchair and its precious cargo into the elevator.

As I stumbled into the elevator on unsteady legs, the towering stranger immediately reached for the display, selecting the 26th floor with a swift touch. His identity was a mystery to me, but in that critical moment, it was inconsequential.

The only priority was Gabriel's desperate need for medical attention.

"Thank you," I rasped, my voice barely rising above a whisper. I found myself slumped on the elevator's grimy floor, legs having betrayed me the moment I stepped inside.

"Don't mention it, little girl," the colossal man responded, his gaze shifting to inspect Gabriel's condition. "Looks like he got sliced up pretty bad. Doesn't strike me as the gang type though. Any clue what went down?"

My lungs felt ablaze, each breath a monumental effort, leaving me incapable of forming words. I could only manage a weak shake of my head in response.

'After today, levelling up Body becomes priority number one. This is absolutely fucking absurd,' I inwardly vowed, frustrated and unnerved by the woeful state of my physical capabilities and the potential catastrophe it would have caused had the giant man not showed up to help out.

"Good news is, the assailant missed anything vital—kidneys, liver—that sort of thing. If they'd hit those, I don't think he'd still be breathing. Bad news? That's still a deep, nasty cut. He won't be up and about for a while," the hulking man elaborated, his eyes studying the severity of Gabriel's wound.

'Damn it, Gabe, what kind of mess have you gotten yourself into?' I mused, the gravity of his condition settling in. *'Once he's stable, I should really offer him the combat knife. Now that I've got [Sharpening] ready to go, I can always find a rock or other makeshift weapon if I have to. Gabriel, on the other hand, clearly needs a decent piece of self-defence gear from now on.'*

After a torturous half-minute that felt more like an eternity, the elevator finally arrived on the 26th floor. Without missing a beat, the towering man manoeuvred the wheelchair, carrying my unconscious brother, down the corridor.

I was hoping he was heading towards Dr. Maltrick's clinic.

Oliver had provided a map in his message, but in the chaos, I hadn't had the time to integrate it with my cerebral interface's map overlay.

Fortunately, our colossal good Samaritan appeared to know precisely where Dr. Maltrick's office was located. Struggling to keep up, and quite frankly failing miserably at it, I followed him through a maze of hallways until we reached a nondescript door.

Above it hung a diminutive, handwritten sign that read "Maltrick."

Just as the massive man raised one of his chromed hands to knock on the handle-less, slate-blue metallic door, it swung open abruptly from the inside. A woman, even smaller than I was, stepped out with brisk, determined steps.

Dr. Maltrick was an enigmatic figure, embodying an intriguing blend of contrasts.

Standing at just 145 cm tall and appearing to be in her early 40s, she carried herself with the self-assured air of someone who had seen it all. Her behaviour, complexion and features gave me only a single thought about her: Latina.

Her sidecut ponytail was not only a bold style choice but also an ever-changing spectacle, cycling through every colour of the rainbow. It immediately reminded me of the "cool" PC components that people went crazy for in my old world.

With a mere wave of her hand, she shooed the behemoth of a man aside, quipping, "You didn't mention bringing a gorilla, girl. That'll cost extra."

Without wasting another second, she approached Gabriel, her eyes quickly assessing his condition.

"He'll live," she declared. "Let's bring him in. I'll examine that cut and get him drugged up. And just so you know, if Valeria doesn't come through with the payment, your ass is mine, girl." With surprising agility for her size, she manoeuvred Gabriel's wheelchair into her clinic.

Feeling a surge of gratitude for the mountainous man who'd helped us, I offered a quick, heartfelt "Thank you," before following the enigmatic Dr. Maltrick inside, the door closing behind us.

As I stepped over the threshold, it was as if I had entered an otherworldly space, a twilight zone of medical practice. The small clinic was a strange blend of high-tech sophistication and dilapidated grime.

Walls that seemed as if they'd been untouched by a paintbrush for decades were decked out with sleek, futuristic medical appliances that hummed quietly. Monitors displaying patient vitals floated alongside rusty shelves filled with jars of unidentifiable substances.

The floors were a patchwork of old tiles and more than a few questionable stains, but upon them sat devices that seemed like they could scan, analyse, and probably even rebuild a human from the cellular level—I was likely exaggerating, but they really did look wildly futuristic and I had no idea what they could potentially do.

The cramped space managed to feel both chaotic and orderly, as if it were teetering on the edge of collapse, held together only by the keen expertise of its enigmatic occupant. As I

navigated through the labyrinthine interior, my eyes met an eclectic mix of hanging cables, neon tubing, and holographic displays casting ethereal glows in dark corners.

Dr. Maltrick moved with a surprising agility through this maze of contradictions, her steps quick but calculated.

She led us into one of the back rooms, which, while not exactly a clean room, exuded a slightly more sterile atmosphere than the rest of the establishment. Surgical tools neatly arranged next to gadgets that appeared to be more science fiction than medical instruments seemed to indicate this was where the serious work happened.

And then, with a suddenness that left me bewildered, Dr. Maltrick effortlessly lifted Gabriel out of the wheelchair and onto what looked less like a doctor's examination table and more like an autopsy platform, replete with chrome fittings and a myriad of built-in interfaces.

Her petite form belied a surprising strength, as she handled Gabriel with the sort of ease that completely blindsided me.

As she began connecting him to various monitors and devices, I realised that despite its paradoxical aesthetics, this place was where life and machinery danced a delicate tango.

And for the moment, all that mattered was that Dr. Maltrick was leading that dance, with Gabriel's life hanging in the balance.

I took a moment to remind myself that Dr. Maltrick was a Slicer, not a Ripper-doc—two vocations that, while both in the realm of underground medical expertise, were worlds apart in ethos and operation.

Ripper-docs operated within a curious framework that resembled a guild or quasi-union.

They adhered to a specific code of conduct, a labyrinth of subterranean rules and stipulations that, if flagrantly violated, could lead to abrupt and unsavoury ends—think closed-casket funerals with alarming speed, faster than they could dissect a low-tier scav jacked up on some Tier-6 chrome implants.

Slicers, on the other hand, were more like medical renegades.

They were once part of legitimate institutions—government healthcare facilities, corporate medical wings, or even military medical units. Their journeys had led them away from these credentialed halls for myriad reasons, spitting them out onto the grime-soaked streets of Neo Avalis.

Unlike Ripper-docs, they operated without a rulebook, unshackled by any governing body. Their only constraints were the unwritten laws of the street, a vague social contract held in place by the threat of vengeance from friends or family.

What Slicers lacked in formal oversight, they more than compensated for with a deeper well of medical knowledge, honed through years in accredited environments. However, this absence of a governing code made them a risky proposition.

Nothing, in theory, prevented a Slicer from stripping you of your valuable chrome and leaving you for dead, save for the potential fallout from aggrieved associates.

Slicers also catered to a more, shall we say, morally flexible clientele.

Ripper-docs might rip out the chrome from a dead scav or two, considering those were the absolute scum of the earth, but steered clear of handling any higher-profile bodies unless you could produce legitimate salvage rights authorised by a fixer or a corporate entity.

Slicers, however, operated on a purely transactional basis.

They weren't finicky about the provenance of the body or the chrome—payment sufficed as a code of ethics. It was perhaps an inevitable byproduct of their previous lives, often immersed in cutthroat atmospheres where the sanctity of life was often weighed against spreadsheets or tactical objectives.

"Ah, let's take a look, shall we?" Dr. Maltrick mumbled, tearing through Gabriel's shirt with a shocking ease that made it seem like Gabriel had been wearing nothing but wet tissues—her strength was nothing short of ludicrous.

Watching Dr. Maltrick swing into action was both relieving and mesmerising.

With practised hands, she laid out an array of high-tech instruments on a tray next to her—the glint of surgical steel mixed with the ethereal glow of some neon-tinged tools and the giant auto-doc machine next to her. The tension that had knotted my muscles began to ease, unspooling into exhaustion as she deftly began to clean and assess Gabriel's wound.

Just as I felt my legs wobble and my vision blur from the day's extreme exertions, I stumbled towards a chair in the corner of the room.

The anxiety and fear that had gripped me were lifting, replaced by a bone-deep fatigue that made me feel as though I could pass out at any moment. As I sank into the chair, I told myself that this was an opportunity to learn.

I had to pay attention; maybe observing Dr. Maltrick could give me some insights that would boost my own [First-Aid] Skill. I made a silent vow to prioritise my training in that area from now on, similarly to the Body Attribute one I had made just minutes before.

"Don't you fall over now, girl," Dr. Maltrick snapped, not missing a beat as she worked. "I don't charge enough to babysit your ass as well, you hear me? Get yourself a glass of water or some shit, but don't dirty up my operating room with your drool from passing out or whatever."

Her words jarred me back to the present.

I nodded weakly, grateful for the warning but too drained to muster a verbal response. She was right; this was neither the time nor the place for me to become another problem she had to solve.

I steadied myself, took a deep breath, and focused on Dr. Maltrick's precise movements, determined to learn as much as I could while also fighting off the overwhelming urge to succumb to my fatigue.

An hour that felt like an eternity later, Dr. Maltrick finished her meticulous work on Gabriel's wound, her hands moving with the precision of a master. She'd double-checked for internal issues, applying nano-sutures where necessary, and finally sealed the outer cut with surgical sutures that looked almost like a zipper across the wound.

"He'll be on his feet in a few days, but expect that gash to throb for a while," she warned, her voice laced with a professional detachment. "Keep the wound clean; that's non-negotiable. I'll toss in a bottle of Antiflam for daily use and a Dolo-R inhaler for the pain spikes. You're capable of hauling him back home yourself, aren't you?"

I found myself nodding, my focus on her surgical expertise over the past hour had been so absorbing that it helped me recover some of my spent energy.

"Excellent. Valeria's account will get the invoice," Dr. Maltrick stated, as she pointed her gloved index finger, still adorned with the medical gauntlet linked to the auto-doc, directly at me. The auto-doc responded immediately, its scalpel extending with a menacing whirr towards me, a theatrical touch I was almost certain she'd done on purpose.

"She'll handle it, I promise you," I replied, making an effort to inject my voice with a confidence I was far from feeling.

She laughed a sardonic laugh. "Promises, promises. If those were currency, I'd be ruling over Neo Avalis, not stitching up wayward kids in a hole like this."

With that, she smoothly disengaged the medical gauntlet, stowing it away before deftly manoeuvring Gabriel back into the wheelchair with a surprising show of strength.

"Now, get the fuck out. And do try to let the door hit you on your way," she dismissed, her eyes already scanning her cluttered desk for the next project. "And remember, if you find yourself needing more medical aid in the future, bring creds. I don't work for gratitude or sob stories."

After heeding most of Dr. Maltrick's advice—mercifully avoiding the door's swing on my way out—I hurriedly made my way back to the elevator bank.

However, upon arriving, a realisation hit me like a ton of bricks: I had no clue how to navigate back to our floor. With Gabriel still unconscious and not a soul around to guide me, my best option was to reach out to Oliver again.

I quickly shot him a message, updating him on Gabriel's condition and pleading for directions to our home floor.

Moments later, my cerebral interface buzzed with Oliver's reply.

[Sera, you're incredible! You've just saved your brother's life! Take a moment to feel proud, you've earned it. We'll celebrate with your favourite food tonight, how's that sound? As for getting back, look for the restricted elevators. They're near the standard ones but set apart, usually around a corner. You'll recognize them by their peculiar black doors—I've attached a photo for reference. Take care of Gabriel. Love you, can't wait to see you both. I'll be home soon.]

The message instantly lifted my spirits; Oliver's encouragement was exactly the boost I needed. Feeling somewhat rejuvenated, I set out to locate the mysterious black doors that served as my key back home.

Navigating through the dimly lit corridors, I soon found the elusive black double-doors that Oliver had described. I stood there for a moment, incredulous.

'How did I overlook these? Probably because "strange, black double-doors" doesn't exactly scream "elevator," I mused to myself.

A swell of irritation rose within me, thinking back on my earlier ordeal. *'Seriously, would a sign kill them? How is anyone supposed to find this bullshit design of an entrance without having a nervous breakdown first?'*

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The journey back to our apartment was, to my immense relief, both swift and uneventful.

The restricted elevator was blissfully empty, and its speed was nothing short of miraculous. *'I'm definitely going to enjoy using the hell out of this one exclusively from now on,'* I thought.

Getting Gabriel back onto our worn-out couch was its own Herculean feat, taking ten gruelling minutes of shifting, lifting, and readjusting. Exhausted, I practically collapsed into the nearby wheelchair, which became my makeshift throne as I caught my breath.

"God, Gabriel, why'd you have to go and get yourself stabbed?" I huffed out, not genuinely angry, more exasperated than anything else. It's not like he'd chosen to get impaled just to make my life difficult.

Plus, given how disoriented he was earlier, I doubted he'd remember anything about this ordeal once he regained consciousness. My plans for a delightful surprise were still very much intact.

Moreover, Oliver would be home soon, a fact that lightened my spirits.

I couldn't help but think to myself, *'Considering the turmoil my earlier messages must've caused him, he could probably use some good news. Maybe even a downright miraculous one...?'*