

Chapter 175 - Darkness

I slid the deck back into my DuraPack as we moved, the familiar weight of it settling against my back, and swapped my hands over to something more immediately useful—two throwing knives pulled and ready, complementing the Raz already sitting in my other hand.

Then I fell in behind Reina, keeping my steps quick and quiet as we filtered through the door.

The apartment hit differently in real-space.

The layout was exactly what I'd mapped—same narrow hallway, same door spacing, same general geometry—but the Cyberspace version had been a clean, textureless approximation of it, all flat grey surfaces and approximate dimensions.

The real thing had character, and not the good kind.

The same rot that had been working its way through the rest of the complex was present here too, but whoever was responsible for this particular unit had apparently committed to the aesthetic with *real* dedication.

The walls had that deep, settled discoloration that came from years of moisture and neglect.

The *smell* was its own separate problem—stale air layered over something organic and unpleasant that I made a conscious decision not to think too hard about, especially given the Scav's presence in this place. It sat at the back of the throat in a way that suggested it had been building up for a *while* and wasn't going anywhere.

I didn't get long to inventory the details, though, because Takeda had already ghosted to a stop beside the living room door—and with how close that door sat to the apartment entrance, the three of us barely had room to stack up properly before things were going to *have* to start happening.

I took a deep breath, and turned my attention inward for just a second.

'Alright, Ego,' I thought, picking my words carefully the way I'd learned to when addressing the Attribute directly rather than just leaning on it passively. *'Don't let me die—no matter what. Take over, when necessary. Everything else, I'll take care of.'*

I set the parameters consciously as I thought it—narrowing Ego's intervention window down to the moments where I was about to make a mistake bad enough to actually kill me, and leaving the rest to my own judgment.

It was a very fine—and probably just as dangerous—line to draw, but an important one.

Because the honest truth was that leaning too hard on Ego was a trap I could already feel the edges of. It was a crutch, and a genuinely great one at that, but crutches weren't legs.

Every time I let it catch something I should've caught myself, I was trading a short-term save for a long-term gap in my own capabilities—and Ego had some stark limits, timing constraints I'd already bumped against several times before, ceilings that would matter a great deal the day I ran into something it *couldn't* cover.

Crutches could help you move around, but they didn't teach you how to walk properly and especially not how to *run*. And if I wanted to become a truly independent person in this world, running would be the very minimum of requirements I'd have to clear.

That thought was still settling when Reina and Takeda exchanged a look in front of me.

Just a half-second of eye contact that carried an entire conversation—a last check, a mutual confirmation, the kind of shorthand that only existed between people who'd done this enough times together to have a shared language for it.

'We're actually about to do this. Stop idling, Ela.'

I pulled back from the surface of my own thoughts and went *deep*.

The space I found there was quiet in the particular way that things were quiet when they were actively holding something back with all their might. And at the center of it, exactly where I'd left it—the bars, the chains, the locks... All of it right where Miss K and I had put it together.

The *thing* behind them was already awake, the way I knew it *always* was.

It shifted against the chains as my attention landed on it, a slow, heavy movement that sent a low rattle through the whole structure, and I felt the shiver move down my spine before I could stop it.

I stared at it for a moment longer than was comfortable.

My honest first-response was the incessant need to turn around and never come back.

To file it under things I didn't need to look at directly and leave it to whatever it was doing behind those bars on its own time. In a different world—a softer one, a more forgiving one—that would've been a completely reasonable choice; the right choice, even.

But Miss K had been pretty clear on the subject, and I knew for a fact that she hadn't been wrong: Sometimes the chains had to come off.

Not because it was pleasant and not because it was safe, but because this world simply didn't run on the assumption that you'd never need the parts of yourself you'd locked away.

It ran on the assumption that eventually, one way or another, it was going to find out what you were truly made of underneath all the careful management that we called a person.

Today was one of those days—and there would be many more of them in the future.

"Alright," I said quietly, into the stillness of my own head, holding the thing's shifting, undefined mass in my attention with a steadiness I didn't entirely feel. "I need you. Right now. But don't get any ideas—this isn't permanent, and the second we're done out there, you're going straight back behind these bars and into those chains."

I let the silence reign for a second, before adding, "I won't have Kenzie or Miss K thinking I've gone completely unhinged next time I walk into the dojo. So keep that in mind..."

Then I took a slow breath, held it, and gave the mental command.

The bars dissolved. Not in any dramatic kind of fashion—just quietly coming apart into drifting motes of grey light that scattered and faded before they hit the floor, like ash.

The locks followed on the second command, disengaging one after another in a clean sequence.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

Each one hitting the floor and going still, their job done—for now.

The *thing* didn't wait for an invitation.

It started expanding the moment the last lock dropped, the chains sliding off its mass with a slow, frictionless ease that made something cold settle in my chest—because they evidently hadn't been hard to shed at all. Like the bars and the locks and the chains had always been more about my comfort than any *actual* containment.

The *thing* grew, and kept growing, and the emotional weight of it came crashing over me in a wave that hit behind the eyes and at the base of the throat simultaneously. Nausea curled through my stomach, the sheer presence of the *thing* pressing against the inside of my skull from every direction at once.

And then it stopped growing and simply came forward—through the space between us, through me, *into* me—and the nausea and the weight and the wrongness of it collapsed inward all at once.

We became whole.

My eyes snapped open.

Edge was already running at full tilt, the familiar ice rushing through my veins—keeping my focus channeled, keeping my hands from shaking, keeping my face from doing anything that would've made Takeda or Reina look twice. My Ego had settled quietly into the background, a silent observer with its hand near the emergency brake, ready to pull if something went badly enough that I couldn't course-correct on my own.

Takeda and Reina, meanwhile, both glanced back at me in the same instant, a last check before the point of no return.

I nodded once.

In the next moment, all hell broke loose.

Takeda shot through the doorway like he'd been fired from something.

By the time my brain had fully registered that he'd moved at all—but not before I had also started moving instinctively—he was already behind the couch. His katana moved in one brutal arc that caught the first and second Scav across the back before either of them had even started to turn, cutting straight through the back of the couch itself in the process.

They folded without a sound, slumping sideways into each other with the boneless immediacy of people whose bodies had simply stopped receiving instructions.

The third on the couch had just enough time to register that something had gone catastrophically wrong and throw themselves off of the couch in a blind panic, before Reina's guns answered the question of *what*.

They roared at almost the exact moment I had slipped between her and Takeda—[Narrow Twist] folding me through the gap without touching either of them, joints rolling through angles that didn't have any business working the way they did, threading the needle cleanly enough that her aim never wavered.

The muzzle blast caught me at near point-blank range however, the sound hitting like a physical thing, setting my ears ringing sharply as the two Scavs against the far wall dropped in a heap before the echo had even begun to work its way around the ceiling.

I was already through the doorway and into the room proper by then, half a step behind where Takeda stood recovering from his initial swing, the ringing sitting hot and insistent in both ears and my footing coming down less clean than I would've liked as a result—but [Elemental Balance] caught it before it became a stumble, the Perk doing its quiet work and forcing my weight to settle solid before my legs had even fully committed to the sprint.

The two Scavs on the dragged-over chairs were in the process of scrambling upright, hands clawing toward weapons with the panicked urgency of people who'd gone from completely checked-out to fighting for their lives in under a second.

Not fast enough.

I was already at a full sprint by now, closing the distance across the room, and as I had a clean line on the first one I let the first of my throwing knives go.

He saw it coming.

His hand came up on pure reflex, throwing itself in front of his throat—and the first knife punched straight through the palm, burying itself deep and sticking there.

He wrenched his hand back instinctively, the way anyone would when something had just gone a significant portion of the way through it, the knife coming with it and tearing as it went, and the scream that came out of him was *raw* and loud enough to cut clean through the general chaos of the room.

But the second knife had already left my hand as well.

The throat was unobstructed now, his hand busy being somewhere else entirely, and the blade found it without any drama whatsoever.

The screaming stopped abruptly—converted, in a single clean instant, into something wet and gurgling and *deeply satisfying* in a way I forced myself to not examine too closely—and he went down in a graceless, collapsing heap that the floor caught without ceremony.

I was already looking towards his left.

The woman came off her chair fast—half her skull plated over in dull, mismatched metal that caught the TV's erratic light in flat, ugly patches, a bowie knife in her fist that had rust freckling the blade and a chipped edge that made it look like it had been used for things knives definitely weren't meant for.

She came in swinging immediately, a wide, aggressive slash aimed at my face that had real commitment behind it if not a lot of technique—she definitely wanted me dead.

I leaned back and let it pass by me without much fanfare.

'Her reach is longer than mine... Can't win on that front.'

That much was immediately obvious—the bowie knife had a good few inches on the Raz, and the metal plating on her skull suggested she'd taken modifications that probably came with some kind of strength or durability bump underneath.

Taking her blade-to-blade straight was a losing proposition, not that doing that was ever a good idea in a knife fight to begin with.

Her speed, though... Her speed was decidedly *not* a problem.

She came around for the second swing before she'd fully recovered her balance from the first, over-rotating slightly, and I stepped to the outside of it with room to spare—the kind of room that told me *everything* I needed to know.

She wasn't even on Tom's level, and he was the slowest person in Miss K's dojo by a wide margin. More importantly though, was the fact that she definitely did not have the rest of his combat prowess nor analytical mind to make up for any of it.

This woman had aggression and reach and probably enough of that raw, Scav psychotic-toughness to absorb things that would put someone else down, but she moved like someone who'd won enough fights through intimidation, group mobbing and brutality that she'd never needed to develop anything resembling actual skill.

Third swing.

I let that one go past too, watching the sloppy, downright insultingly simple mechanics of it, and then I stepped in.

The distance collapsed to nothing in a single motion and I drove the Raz into the side of her neck before she could react—felt the blade find the gap just below the shoddy metal plating's edge, the particular resistance and then sudden *give* as it worked through tendon and cartilage and the thin architecture of bone that sat between the surface and what lay beneath. And then the artery, and the heat of the liquid it held inside spraying and gushing across my hand, and the shiver that moved up my spine and spread—

I pulled myself back. *Hard.*

Took the feeling and the lapse that had produced it and shoved both of them down into the same deep, quiet place I kept everything I wasn't ready to deal with yet, burying it under several layers of *later-and-not-now*.

I torqued the Raz sideways and *tore* it clear through, the motion finishing what the entry had started—nearly taking her head off entirely—and the woman dropped to the floor and stayed there in a way that left no room for any level of ambiguity.

My eyes swept the room immediately, cataloguing corners, checking for movement, looking for anything still upright and hostile as my heart hammered in my chest.

Beneath the adrenaline, threaded through it so thoroughly it was almost indistinguishable from it, was that other *thing*—the hot, bright flare of pure, unadulterated elation at the blood on my hands and the bodies on the floor, the smell of gore and adrenaline, mixed with the coppery taste of it all that I could feel in the back of my throat and coating my mouth—I grabbed it and threw it down the well before it could finish forming a complete thought.

'*Stay focused, Ela. Stay focused.*'

[Edge] was working hard, doing its level best to keep the lid on what the darkness was pouring into me now that it had tasted open air—the intensity of it almost staggering, all that pent-up pressure *finally* off its chain and absolutely not interested in going quietly back behind the bars.

The flames of it pushed against [Edge]'s steadying grip from every direction at once, and [Edge] held, but it wasn't effortless the way it usually was. It was fighting for its damn life inside of me—and my sanity.

Takeda and Reina both swept their eyes across me in the same instant—a quick, professional check.

I nodded once.

We were clearly done here.

Reina was already moving before my chin had finished dropping, turning on her heel and racing out into the hallway. Takeda peeled off right behind her, and I followed hard on his heels, the three of us funneling back out into the corridor and toward whatever Higgins and Kaito had walked into on the other side of that mimic-door.

I stepped back out into the hallway behind Takeda and pressed myself as close to the wall as the space allowed, giving everyone room to move and think without me becoming an obstacle.

The first door on the right was exactly as I'd left it—closed, unremarkable and likely just as empty as Cyberspace had proven it was, given that nothing had come out of it.

The second door, however, was not closed.

It wasn't *anything* anymore, really—whatever Higgins and Kaito had done to it had left the frame intact and not much else, the door itself hanging at a broken angle that suggested it had been encouraged open with significant force and minimal patience. And from the gap it had left, thick black smoke was rolling steadily out into the hallway, the kind of dense, low-visibility output that didn't come from anything merely accidental.

I could just make out Higgins on the far side of the doorframe, back flat against the corridor wall, eyes finding ours across the smoke-filled gap with an expression that had shed all of its earlier composure in favour of an annoyed impatience.

One hand had Kaito by the jacket, keeping him upright against the wall beside him—and Kaito was bleeding, the dark stain spreading across his side in a way that looked serious but not immediately fatal, his jaw set with the tight, focused expression of someone converting pain into pure stubbornness through sheer force of will.

The group chat flared.

["As expected, the boss is inside. Five others with him. Smoked themselves—they've got breather masks or lungs. At least two of them can see through it. Don't get close, they got guns. Kaito's hit, but he should make it."]

["Plan?"] Takeda's reply came back before the notification had finished fading.

["We can wait. They have no exit."]

That was Kaito.

Even bleeding against a wall, apparently still running tactical assessments.

["Reinforcements are a risk,"] Higgins answered immediately after, and the chat went briefly quiet while everyone sat with that. ["Better we end this fast. But they have guns, so we need Reina—and Reina can't see in that."]

A short pause. ["Anyone have anything for the smoke, by chance?"]

We all looked at each other across the hallway.

I ran my hands over my DuraPack and my jacket pockets in the same motion, doing a quick, thorough inventory of everything I was carrying and already knowing what the answer was going to be before I finished.

Nothing. Not even close.

Anti-smoke gear wasn't something you just picked up casually—it sat in that awkward category of equipment that was expensive enough to feel unjustifiable right up until the *exact* moment you desperately needed it.

And smoke itself wasn't typically used like this either.

It was a flushing tool, or a cover for a retreat—not something people generally deployed to carve out a one-sided defensive advantage and then just sat behind it.

'This is all kinds of bullshit...!'

A round of negatives populated the group chat in short succession.

["Fuck."] wrote Higgins, and somehow that single word captured the situation more efficiently than a full tactical breakdown would have.

The group chat sat silent after that, the smoke continuing its steady, unhurried roll out into the hallway like it had all the time in the world.

Nobody had an immediate answer. Nobody had an immediate *anything*, really.

We stood there for a handful of seconds that felt longer than they were, and I was aware, distantly, of the darkness still pushing against [Edge]'s grip with that same relentless, hungry pressure—the heat of it moving through my blood in slow, insistent waves, making my thoughts run hotter and faster and less carefully than they probably should have, given the precarious situation.

Which was maybe why the question formed so cleanly.

'Does collateral matter here...?'

I turned it over for a half-second and couldn't find an immediate reason why it should.

Higgins had been straightforward about the brief from the start—clearing operation, remove the Scavs from the location, full stop. No preservation requirements, no retrieval objectives, no conditions attached to the *how*. Every single person inside that smoke needed to stop existing by the end of this, and the specifics of how that happened hadn't been anyone's concern up until fifteen seconds ago when the smoke had made it all far too complicated.

The smoke was the problem. The smoke was also, now that I was looking at it differently, not *necessarily* the obstacle it appeared to be—because obstacles, inherently, assumed you were constrained to the same approach that had already been blocked.

A plan assembled itself in the space of a single breath as my blood continued to run hotter and hotter at the idea of implementing it, and there was really only one variable I needed confirmed before it became imminently viable.

["How thick are the walls in this place?"] I typed into the group chat and waited for a reply...