

Chapter 107 - Debt

Lying flat on Misha's kitchen table with a total stranger elbow-deep in my guts wasn't exactly how I'd pictured my day going, if I was being entirely honest with myself.

It had been about ten minutes since the Ripper had gotten to work, meticulously fishing out the myriad of bone shards embedded in my chest and abdomen. The whole time, he'd been muttering under his breath, clearly more annoyed by *his* situation than mine.

As we all had the pleasure of learning, the old man had been right in the middle of an early dinner when Misha had frantically called him over. Now, between pulling out bone fragments and grumbling about my "*goddamn disaster of a ribcage*," he was also lamenting the true tragedy of the evening—his meal, now stone-cold and utterly, irrevocably ruined beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Apparently, "*I wouldn't have died anytime soon*", he said, which meant he *could* have finished eating before coming over. And that realization, in his mind, was the *real* disaster here.

Naturally, I felt so *much* sympathy for his truly severe plight.

Which was exactly why I'd spent the last five minutes completely ignoring him, flipping through my System Interface instead.

The experience drops from the absolute shitshow of the last few hours weren't enough to make it *worth it*, exactly, but they definitely softened the sting of having completely fucked up my first real fight against an actual high-level threat.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Appraise] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for Tech Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [{Anima Razor}] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

[System]: 600xp gained for [CQC] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for [[Perform]] Skill.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Murder] Skill.

[System]: [Murder] has **reached** Level 1. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download available.

[System]: 400xp gained for Edge Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

[System]: Intuition Attribute has reached 5. Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.

[System]: 400xp gained for Ego Attribute.

[System]: Ego Attribute has reached 5. Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

[System]: Golden Phoenix Ganger (Enforcer) defeated. [x2]

[System]: 150xp (+100xp) gained for defeating Golden Phoenix Ganger (Enforcer). [First-Kill Bonus Experience]

[System]: You have reached Level 1. You have earned 1x [General Skill Point].

[System]: Note - 1x [General Skill Point] will automatically be applied in 47:05:47.

[System]: 50xp gained for defeating Golden Phoenix Ganger (Enforcer).

[System]: Golden Phoenix Ganger (Enforcer) drops 1x (Uncommon) Data-Shard.

Staring at the long, colorful mess of System notifications and experience drops, I couldn't help but feel a flicker of excitement. Because, for the first time, it wasn't just a Skill or an Attribute that had leveled up. I had leveled up.

Like, as a person.

I guess if I were in a game, this would be my *Character Level* or *General Level* or something equally dramatic. And just like in *Neon Dragons*, hitting Level 1 had dropped a shiny new [General Skill Point] into my lap—meaning the rest of the level curve was probably going to follow the same pattern.

One [General Skill Point] every level.

One [General Attribute Point] every second.

One [General Perk Point] every third.

A brand-new [Skill Slot] every fourth.

And then, of course, every tenth level was a *jackpot*, handing out one of *each*. In addition to that, as if that wasn't enough already, Level 10 also came with a fresh [Trait] pick—arguably the most game-changing part.

Not that I was anywhere *close* to Level 10, of course, but the thought alone sent a spark of giddiness through me.

I almost giggled before I caught myself—*almost*.

Not fast enough, though.

The Ripper shot me a look over his blood-splotted safety-glasses, pausing mid-extraction of what I could only assume was a disturbingly large chunk of my ribcage.

“*No movement*, little lady!” he grumbled, clearly unimpressed with my sudden good mood.

I immediately sobered up, pressing my lips together in a tight line. Right.

‘Best not to push my luck when someone’s got their hands inside my chest cavity...’

I had made it a point of keeping my gaze averted from that whole business. I had *zero* interest in seeing my own insides anytime soon. Or, really... *ever*.

The only real downer in my whole System deep dive—the big, ugly elephant in the room that I *wanted* to ignore but knew I’d have to face sooner or later—was [Murder] leveling up.

Because that wasn’t just some abstract concept. That was objective proof.

Proof that I hadn’t just killed someone once in a tragic accident.

Proof that I’d done it enough times for the System to decide, “*Hey, you’ve got enough hands-on experience with this. Here, have some Knowledge and Muscle-Memory to go along with it.*”

I swallowed hard, but thankfully, my Ego was still keeping everything at arm’s length.

Even if it wasn’t at 5 quite yet, it was doing its job very well, keeping me from spiraling into an existential crisis *mid-surgery*.

Still, the fact remained—I was, fundamentally, *not* built for this world.

I had known that.

Since day one.

Since the moment I accepted that I was inside *Neon Dragons* for real.

I had told myself I’d acclimate. Adapt. That I’d “*figure it out*”, somehow.

But really? I’d just been running from it this entire time.

I hadn’t *actually* made any progress toward truly accepting the brutal reality I lived in now.

No real strides, no baby steps. Hell, not even an awkward shuffle in the right direction, if I was already being truly honest here.

So maybe this had been inevitable. Maybe I had been deluding myself, thinking I could tiptoe around this world’s brutality without *actually* getting any blood on my hands.

Maybe this was just my bandaid getting ripped off.

Maybe my Ego forcing me to kill—to ensure survival—was, in a weird, fucked-up way, a good thing.

Or *maybe*... that was all just my Ego working for that overtime pay, rationalizing everything to keep me from absolutely losing my shit.

I had a much better idea now of just *how far* Ego would truly go to ensure my self-set goals were met.

Right now, its entire directive was *damage control*—keeping my System a secret, making sure I didn't panic in a way that could expose me. If that meant warping my thoughts just enough to make me *okay* with all of this, then yeah, I wouldn't put it past Ego to do exactly that.

Still, I couldn't deny one thing: The experience drops had felt good.

Very good.

And that? That was *definitely* all me—I had *always* been an experience addict, after all.

And *Neon Dragons*, much like every other game in its genre, rewarded experience based on risk above all else.

And what was riskier than a life-or-death battle?

This was the third time I'd come face-to-face with potential death, and each time, the experience drops were downright astronomical.

Even this fight—short, messy, full of mistakes—had given me more progress in my Skills than any training session ever could. No amount of sparring, drills, or controlled environments could ever replicate the sheer survival-driven experience-drops that came from real combat.

So who was to say that, in a world where might made right, this kind of behavior wasn't just... expected?

'Maybe it's time—'

Before I could finish that thought, the Ripper's voice cut through the air like a scalpel.

"Bad news," he announced, loud enough for Misha and Jade to hear. "She's already lost too much blood, and keeping her open like this ain't exactly helping the situation. Now, as much as I hate to let a little lady like this suffer, I gotta ask—"

He exhaled through his nose, tilting his head toward Jade and Misha. “What’s the budget lookin’ like? I can fix her up *good*, but it ain’t gonna be cheap. Otherwise, I’ll have to slap some stitches on her and close her up before she bleeds out completely.”

And there it was.

The moment I had been dreading ever since I heard a Ripper was on the way.

I had hoped—naively, of course—that we could somehow avoid this conversation altogether. But this was *Neon Dragons*.

Nobody did anything for free, least of all Rippers.

Their entire business model was built on the exchange of pain for payment.

And me? I only had 50 Creds left after my shopping spree at Misha’s.

Not *nearly* enough for a full reconstruction, but maybe—*maybe*—enough to patch me up just enough that my Rest Function could take over and finish the job.

“I got about—”

“Misha will—”

Misha and I spoke at the *exact* same time, only for both of us to get *completely* drowned out by an unexpected third voice.

Jade.

“Do whatever you need to, Ripper,” she declared, her voice carrying a forcefulness I absolutely never expected to hear from her. “I’ll cover *all* of it.”

For a second, my brain just short-circuited.

‘*What...?*’

“I owe her that much, at the very least,” Jade said, stepping forward from where she’d been sitting next to Misha, her gaze locking onto mine. “It’s not gonna clear my debt to you, not by a long shot... but I hope it’s a start.”

I stared at her, completely at a loss for words.

‘*Debt? What fucking debt?!*’

My brain scrambled to put the pieces together, looping back over every conversation, every interaction I’d had with her.

When the hell had Jade decided she *owed* me anything?

“You *love* to hear it,” the Ripper chuckled, breaking the moment as he nudged Jade back toward her seat—surprisingly gentle this time, compared to his previous no-nonsense shoving.

Before I could even *begin* to argue, to protest, to process what the hell had just happened, the Ripper snapped open the heavy, steel-clasped suitcase he’d brought with him, pulling out two injectors.

“Alright, little lady, here’s the deal,” he said, holding up the first injector, filled with a deep crimson liquid. “This one’ll help with the blood loss. Has some serious juice in it—gonna make sure you don’t bleed out on me.”

Then, he lifted the second one—another red liquid, but this one was a little less saturated. “And this one? This one’s gonna knock you right out. I need to start reconstructing your ribcage and clear out the last major bone shards near your lungs and heart. Can’t have you twitching mid-surgery, so it’s best if you’re out cold for this. You good with that?”

I wasn’t.

Every fiber of my being absolutely *recoiled* at the idea of being unconscious again—leaving my broken body in the hands of some guy I’d just met, no matter how experienced he seemed.

And my Ego? My Ego was *violently* against it, practically screaming at me to stay awake, to stay in control, to not let some unknown factor poke around in my body any more than absolutely necessary, no matter what.

But the logical part of my mind—the one buried under layers of instinct, paranoia, and system-driven adrenaline—whispered something else.

He was right.

I was completely and utterly wrecked.

My body was hanging on by a damn thread, and no amount of stubbornness or skill points was going to let me grit my way through this one.

It was one thing to fish out bone shards from muscle or even near some of the less vital organs, but when it came to the *heart*? Yeah, you really couldn’t afford to fuck around with that.

One accidental cough, a shiver, even a momentary lapse in judgment, and those precise little instruments the Ripper was using could slip—and that would be it.

My life, over in a literal heartbeat.

'But I really shouldn't let myself get knocked out...'

I locked eyes with the Ripper, who was waiting expectantly for my answer.

"Muscle relaxant," I rasped, barely managing to get the words out. I weakly shook my head, just enough to signal toward the lighter-red injector. "No anesthetics."

He raised an eyebrow at that, clearly not having expected *that* request, but didn't argue. Instead, he tucked the red injector back into his kit and pulled out a light-green one.

"Well, if that's what the little lady wants," he muttered, inspecting the vial before flicking off the safety cap. "Most people don't *choose* to be awake for something like this—hell, I'd say about ninety-nine percent of my patients would rather be out cold—but it's not unheard of. Just don't come crying to me if you regret it halfway through."

With that, he pressed the crimson-red injector against my neck.

A slight *push*, then a cool sensation spread through my veins, almost refreshing—like taking a deep breath of crisp air. Within seconds, the light chill settled into my system, and my heart thumped a little stronger.

Next was the green injector.

The Ripper hesitated just for a second, his eyes flicking to mine one last time. "You *sure* about this? Last chance to take the easy route."

I barely had the strength to grunt, but I did, managing to tilt my chin in the slightest nod.

"Alright then," he said with a shrug. "Your funeral—hopefully not literally."

A sharp *click*, and the injector discharged. A wave of *nothingness* crashed over me.

Every muscle in my body went limp at once, like someone had just *unplugged* me.

I couldn't even twitch.

It was like being encased in cement—*fully aware*, *fully awake*, but completely incapable of moving even a millimeter.

I was trapped in my own body from here-on out; but at least I could still pay attention to what was happening around me—and I could still move my eyes frantically as well, in case I needed to get Jade or Misha to interfere somehow.

“Time to get started on the real thing, then,” the Ripper announced with an eager smile on his face, that I wasn’t quite sure whether it was putting me at ease or unnerving me...

The next three hours—or what felt like three days—crawled by as the Ripper worked on my chest like it was some kind of morbid puzzle, snapping the pieces back into place with the precision of a man who had probably rebuilt more bodies than I could count.

Valir’s kick had done some *serious* damage, no doubt about that, but—silver lining—it had been so strong that it mostly broke my ribs into large chunks and sent me flying across the pavement, rather than shattering them into a million tiny splinters.

That, according to the Ripper, had actually made his job a lot easier.

Instead of digging through my insides for jagged shards, he just had to reassemble the big pieces and *glue* them back together with medical-grade bonding agents.

By the time he was stapling my skin shut and spraying the wound down with some high-end disinfectant-and-sealing compound, he assured me I didn’t need to worry about scarring. The spray would handle that. Not that I was particularly worried about it, given my Rest Function, but it was nice to know either way.

I wasn’t *fine*—not even close—but I was as good as I could realistically be, given the situation.

The Ripper and Jade had left the room to discuss the bill and payment, leaving me alone with Misha.

She stepped closer, her long, seven-digit hands cupping my cheeks as she let out a low, soft coo—a sound that was strangely soothing, making my already-exhausted body *that* much more tempted to just slip into unconsciousness.

“Ela is stupid...” Misha mumbled, her voice carrying a weight of quiet exhaustion.

“Very, very stupid. Ela promised Misha that Ela would be fine, yet Ela was *not* fine. Ela is very stupid and a bad liar.”

Her words, more resigned than angry, sent a dull ache through my chest. I honestly didn’t know how to respond. Not that I *could* if I tried.

The muscle relaxant had effectively turned my body into dead weight, leaving me trapped inside myself, barely able to do more than shift my eyes.

“Misha has prepared another set of clothes for Ela,” she continued, her hands gently massaging my cheeks, as if trying to soothe herself as much as she was soothing me.

My eyes widened slightly.

‘There’s no fucking way I can afford that right now!’

As if reading my thoughts, Misha pressed on without hesitation.

“Misha will not accept payment for these. Misha, like Jade, owes Ela. If not for being a friend, then for bringing Jade and potential new customers here.”

I wanted to argue, but—again—paralysis.

And, if I was being honest... I wasn’t sure I even had it in me to fight her on this one, not when she sounded as emotionally drained as she did right now.

She leaned over me, her ruby-crystal eyes—now back to their usual round-cut—locked onto mine with an intensity I hadn’t seen before.

“Misha will be honest: Misha never expected Ela to follow Ela’s word that first time,” she murmured, her voice quieter than usual, lacking its usual enthusiasm. “Misha was *lonely*. Happy that Ela considered buying goods... Misha has not had many good experiences in recent times, so Misha made an exception for the business: Give Ela good prices and let Ela leave with nothing but a promise of coming back to buy more, even if Ela would almost assuredly never return.”

Her lips curled into a tired smile, something softer, more genuine than I was used to seeing from her. “But Ela *did* return. And then again. And then brought Jade and the promise of other customers. And even taught Jade how to speak to Misha without making Misha’s head hurt... Misha is very thankful.”

She exhaled, the weight behind her words settling into the air between us. “After all, the Emporium is doing well, but it can always do better.”

She shifted slightly, then leaned in, pressing her forehead gently against mine. The coolness of her skin was a stark contrast to the warmth radiating from my own feverish body, grounding me in the moment.

We stayed like that for a few seconds—maybe longer—until curiosity got the better of me.

I tapped into the pinging [Cultural Savant] inside my head, the only thing I really *could* do in my current state.

“The touching of foreheads is a Gryplik custom reserved for close-knit family members or lovers, and is a sign of deep affection for another. It represents the acceptance of the ‘individual’ by the other, regardless of their status among Gryplik kind, such as a collective group or name.”

Oh.

My eyes flickered toward Misha, but she didn’t move, didn’t say anything else—just kept her forehead pressed to mine, as if silently reaffirming the meaning behind the gesture.

I didn’t have the strength to process all of it, not right now.

But one thing was certain: I meant a lot more to her than I had ever realized.

Being accepted as an *individual* by a Gryplik—by Misha—was a big deal. And even if I had the ability to reciprocate in this moment, I wouldn’t have known *how*.

But I wanted to. So I *would*.

‘I need to find someone who actually knows about Gryplik culture. Someone who can tell me how to return the favor properly,’ I decided then and there. *‘And if I could just figure out whether speaking Gryplik would turn me into some corpo’s favorite new science project or not... Misha would be so happy if I could speak to her in her own language.’*

I mentally shoved it to the top of my ever-growing to-do list, just below the Operator meeting. The second I had access to better intel, I’d get my answers—and make sure Misha got the recognition and business she deserved.

‘I should bring some Operators to her, too,’ I mused. *‘They’re always in need of top-tier gear. No way they wouldn’t want to buy from her.’*

The sound of Jade’s footsteps outside snapped me from my thoughts.

Misha pulled back, her forehead leaving mine as she took a step away, shifting back to a more neutral, natural stance just as the door swung open.

Jade barely made it inside before blurting, “How’s Ela doing?”

Misha, arms crossed, nodded once. “Ela is fine. The Ripper has done good work, as the Ripper usually does.”

Then, tilting her head slightly, she added, “Misha thanks Jade for paying the Ripper. Misha did not expect it, but is very thankful for Jade’s generosity on this matter.”

Jade blinked, looking vaguely uncomfortable for a second before shrugging it off. “It was the least Jade could do, really. It’s not worth mentioning...”

She stepped up beside me, leaning down just enough so I could see her face clearly.

She looked about as perturbed as I imagined Misha would if her Gryplik features were translated into a human’s—brows furrowed, lips pressed into a tight, uneasy line.

“I talked it over with Vega,” she started, keeping her voice measured. “We’re covering all the Ripper’s expenses to start paying back our debt to you.”

That hit me like a freight train.

‘Vega agreed to this?!’

I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

Vega wasn’t the type to throw money around, especially not on someone outside of the Clawed Beasts. And considering they’d made it *very* clear in front of both Misha and the Ripper that I wouldn’t owe them anything in return, it wasn’t like they could suddenly turn around later and demand favors to pay it off.

Jade must’ve seen the argument forming in my eyes because she pushed ahead before I could gather the breath to protest.

“And I *know* you’re probably gonna fight me on this, but... just let me do this, *this once*, okay?” She exhaled sharply, frustration creeping into her tone. “I... I should’ve been more useful during the fight. And the one before that, with Damien. If I hadn’t been so useless...”

She trailed off, gaze shifting away, her hands tightening into fists at her sides.

“Just... I’m sorry, okay?” she muttered, jaw clenching. “I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. If you’ll still accept me as your liaison, that is...”

Her eyes snapped back to mine, suddenly widening like she’d just realized what she said.

“Ahh! I meant—like—obviously, this isn’t a condition for Vega covering the bill or anything! And I *definitely* didn’t mean to bring it up while you’re literally paralyzed, like some kind of manipulative asshole—”

Her eyes darted toward Misha, as if worried the Gryplik might just snap her neck for the implications.

The whole situation was so thoroughly hilarious to my exhausted, borderline-delirious brain that I couldn't help myself—I laughed.

Or, well, I *tried* to. What actually came out was a hoarse, rattling breath that sounded like someone strangling a broken accordion.

Still, the noise was enough to send Jade and Misha into a brief panic, both of them rushing toward me in alarm—until they realized I wasn't dying, just *wheezing* like an idiot. Which, of course, only made me laugh harder.

Jade groaned and dragged a hand down her face, shaking her head. "You're an *idiot*."

Misha, ever the supportive friend, nodded furiously. "Misha agrees. Ela is indeed very stupid. *Very, very, very stupid...*"

—

Two hours later, dressed in a fresh set of operator gear courtesy of Misha, I all but collapsed through the door of my apartment.

Jade had been the one to help me into the elevator, carrying both my drone and backpack since I still didn't have the strength to haul them myself.

She'd hesitated before leaving, clearly itching to ask about all the weird, impossible things she'd witnessed regarding *me*—my body, my bleeding; or rather, the lack thereof, my sudden recovery—but I'd managed to get her to agree to wait just a few more days before demanding answers.

She hadn't been happy about it, but at least she'd seemed open to the idea of *not* mentioning any of it to Vega.

Yet.

Small mercies.

Misha, on the other hand, had been easier to handle—mostly because she was too busy making me promise to come back soon. Not just to buy the rest of the throwing knives she'd set aside for me, but to pick up more gear when I could actually afford it.

I'd reassured her I'd also bring more customers her way, only for her to wave me off, insisting that Jade and her "friends" would keep her busy enough for now.

Instead, she'd ordered me—*ordered me*—to focus on recovering.

And, honestly? I wasn't about to argue.

With a heavy sigh, I stumbled further into my apartment, already dreading the next few minutes.

Despite being on the verge of collapse and wanting nothing more than to clock a solid eight hours into the Rest Function, there was still one massive, looming issue that needed handling before I completely lost my mind: Disabling my Ego.

Stripping off my clothes with slow, deliberate movements—each one taking more effort than it should—I made my way into the shower and cranked the heat all the way up.

If I was about to get mentally destroyed, I might as well do it in an environment I actually enjoyed. And nothing said *comfort* quite like steaming-hot water, thick mist, and the illusion that I wasn't completely falling apart at the seams.

The heat seared against my skin, the steam curling around me like a thick, suffocating embrace, but it barely registered.

My mind was too busy circling the inevitable.

'No more running. No more delays...'

I sucked in a shaky breath, feeling the weight of what I was about to do settle deep in my bones.

"Well... Here goes nothing," I muttered, steeling myself as I mentally reached for the lever keeping my Ego in check.

It was time to face the music and see where my conscience decided to dump me after everything I'd done over the last few hours...