

Chapter 178 - Scrambling

Surprisingly enough, nobody stopped us on the way down.

No lingering Scavs with a grudge and poor situational awareness, no nosy neighbours cracking their doors open to see what all the noise had been about. The stairwell was empty, the ground floor was empty, and the street outside was doing a very convincing impression of a place where absolutely *nothing* had happened, ever.

'Which—honestly, fair,' I found myself thinking as we pushed through the building's front door and out back onto the street. 'Nosy doesn't exactly have a long life expectancy in a world like this. Gunfire goes off two floors up and the smart play is to find something very interesting to look at on the opposite wall until it stops.'

The *really* sensible ones probably hit the floor first, *then* found something interesting to look at.

We filed back into the car in roughly the same configuration as the ride over—me wedged into the back between Reina and Kaito, which had felt like a mild inconvenience on the way there but now felt like a surprisingly useful arrangement.

Kaito was on my left, and with the interior light doing just enough work to see by, I got my first proper look at what he'd done to himself in lieu of actual medical attention.

I stared at it for a moment, as it was, genuinely, a lot to take in.

He'd packed and stuffed clothing strips—torn from what looked like his own jacket lining, from the colour of it—directly into the bullet wounds themselves, then hit the whole situation with a layer of spray bandage over the top like he was sealing a drafty window.

The result was a field dressing that would've made any trained medic inhale sharply through their teeth and reach for a drink.

It was extremely rudimentary and unfathomably unsanitary.

And also *exactly* the kind of improvised disaster I would've put together myself before the [First-Aid] Skill downloads had rewired my understanding of what a wound actually needed.

And yet—and this was the quietly humbling part about this whole ordeal—it was working.

The bleeding had stopped. The spray seal was holding.

'So I wouldn't have bled out in a situation like this, even without [First-Aid]. Point for me, I'd say,' I thought, then revised the assessment immediately. 'Alright, maybe a half-point, considering the infection chance...'

I sat with the question of whether to say and do something for about thirty seconds as we started pulling out of the alley that Higgins had left the car in.

Redoing the dressing was an option—I had the Combo Kit, I had the knowledge now to do it properly, and some part of me that had apparently absorbed a strong enough opinion on wound hygiene during the download, that it was making its feelings known about the clothing strips currently stuffed into a gunshot wound.

Then again.

We were already moving and the Ripper was the very literal next destination.

And a Ripper wasn't going to work around my neatly applied field dressing—they were going to strip everything back to baseline and deal with the actual underlying damage themselves, which meant anything I did right now was getting undone in ten minutes anyway.

'So what's the real argument here...?' I thought, watching the city slide past the window. 'A bit of Skill experience, maybe. In exchange for burning through supplies that might actually matter somewhere down the line—like a situation where there's no Ripper at the end of the car ride...'

The math didn't really math on that one.

I did a quick once-over on myself as well while the city scrolled past the windows, running my hands along my arms and sides in the methodical way the [First-Aid] downloads had apparently baked into my instincts—checking anywhere that might've taken a hit without registering it in the moment.

Adrenaline had a well-documented habit of burying pain signals until the situation decided it was done with you, and I'd been moving fast enough in that apartment that a clean slice across the wrong angle could've gone completely unnoticed.

But, luckily, I found nothing. Not even a scratch.

Which, honestly, didn't come as much of a surprise.

Misha's outfit wasn't exactly standard-issue, entry-Operator fare—it was built for handling significantly worse than a handful of fourth-layer Scavs with questionable gear and thermal eye implants. Putting it up against *that* particular crew was roughly equivalent to bringing a katana to a knife fight and then feeling smug about winning.

I smoothed the front of the jacket back down, satisfied, and started pulling up the System Interface to check on my gains—

"Fuck—!"

Higgins' voice hit like the crack of a whip in a perfectly silent room—sharp and involuntary in a way that landed *completely* differently from his usual register. Before my brain had even finished processing what was going on with him, Reina's guns were out and she fired through the right side of the car.

The sound in the enclosed space was catastrophic.

The ringing that followed the gun going off wasn't a gradual fade-in. Instead, it arrived fully formed and simply sat there, high-pitched and *very* committed to staying.

I didn't make the decision to move.

My body was *already moving*, folding itself down and sideways, tucking behind the combined mass of Kaito and Reina with a speed and economy that hadn't come from me directly.

My Ego had triggered—the initial goal I had given it inside the apartment, never having been pulled back—and had taken the wheel the moment threat conditions registered, and it was *extremely* uninterested in my input on the matter.

I found myself wedged as low as the seatbelt and footwell geometry allowed, shoulders braced, weight distributed in the specific way that anticipated impact rather than tried to avoid it, and I hadn't consciously contributed a single step of that process.

'What—what the fuck is happening?'

Reina kept firing.

Someone—probably Higgins—was cursing in the front seat with the focused, rhythmic intensity of a person doing it to stay functional rather than as an expression of feeling.

The adrenaline rushing through my veins came in a wave that hit everything at once—vision sharpening, hands wanting to do something, Ego holding them firmly in place and overruling the impulse completely.

Half a second, probably less than that even.

The impact, when it came, was exactly as anticipated.

The car met whatever it met with a sound that I would have more attributed to an explosion—metal and momentum doing the kind of argument that left marks on both parties.

The vehicle bucked sideways under the force of it, inertia shoving everything in the cabin forward and left in the same lurching instant, and the only reason I didn't go with it was Ego having pre-loaded the brace.

My shoulder hit the back of the seat in front of me hard enough to really feel it, absorbed it, and then everything was briefly, ringing stillness.

"Ugh—*out!* Left side—everyone out, left side, *now!*"

Higgins' voice had shed everything that usually made it his—the measure, the deliberation, the particular weight of someone who very clearly thought before he spoke. What was left was pure clipped, urgent and threaded through with something tight and pained underneath it that he wasn't quite managing to keep out.

The door to my left was already opening as Kaito practically rolled out of the vehicle.

I could hear—or rather *feel*—Reina still firing somewhere behind and to the right, the angle changed now that the car had stopped moving, tracking something that was apparently still very much a problem.

Ego finally loosened its grip as it seemed to consider the immediate situation dealt with and so I moved with the flow of the exit, following Kaito out of the vehicle with my DuraPack in hand.

The door swung open and I half-crawled, half-fell out onto the street, one hand hitting the asphalt to catch myself before I got my footing and straightened up behind the cover of the car's rear flank.

Then I actually looked at where we were, and the words that came to mind were "*in trouble*".

Reina was still inside, too busy still firing to move, the rhythm of the shots thumping through the car's body panel against my shoulder as I pressed against it.

I reached back in through the open door, grabbed the first solid thing I could find which turned out to be her jacket collar, and *pulled*.

She came out mid-reload, both pistols cracked open with the professional efficiency of someone who'd performed the motion enough times that it had stopped requiring thought, and she didn't stop moving as she cleared the door and dropped into a crouch beside me.

"Thanks!"

The word came out loud, slightly *too* loud, calibrated for a volume she clearly thought the situation required—which told me her ears were in roughly the same state as mine, which was to say a high, sustained whine over everything with the rest of the world arriving muffled underneath it.

I barely heard her. I nodded anyway.

Higgins had Takeda around the shoulder on the other side of the car, both of them down behind the hood, and that was the full crew accounted for—all five of us flattened against the crashed vehicle in various states of function.

The car itself had ended its journey nose-first into the facade of an apartment building that looked, in the specific way of fourth-layer architecture, almost molecularly identical to the one we'd just spent the last hour clearing.

Same water-stained rockcrete. Same geometry. Same sense of a building that had stopped being maintained sometime around the decade it was built and had simply continued existing out of structural stubbornness.

We were maybe two or three blocks from the original location at most.

Still deep in the fourth layer, which meant the lighting was doing its usual thing—dim overhead, all the actual illumination coming sideways from the neon bleed of advertisements and street signage stacked up the building faces around us.

Everything looked simultaneously washed-out *and* oversaturated, the kind of colour palette that shouldn't have worked and didn't, all neon pinks and sickly greens and the particular white-blue of LED streetlamps that had seen better decades, thrown over concrete and grime and making it all somehow worse.

We were at a three-way intersection.

Not ideal geometry for the situation we appeared to be in.

Reina peaked back up over the car's flank and fired twice. Dropped back down.

Higgins rose above the hood on the opposite side, fired a controlled burst from a compact pistol I hadn't clocked him carrying until this very moment, and then dropped back behind cover with a sharp hiss through his teeth, one hand pressed hard into his left side.

That answered one question I hadn't bothered asking yet and raised several others.

I took a breath, picked the right rear corner of the car, and went low—one quick, controlled look around the edge, just enough to build a picture of what the fuck was even going on.

Three cars sat across the street in a loose, improvised blockade formation, positioned with the kind of deliberate placement that said ambush rather than accident.

A fourth was off to the side, resting on its roof with dark smoke pouring from the undercarriage in a thick, steady column—that one had almost certainly been what Higgins had clipped before losing the car to the building.

Behind the three intact vehicles, spread between them in the scrappy, opportunistic way of people who'd done this before but not often enough to be good at it: A dozen Scavs, approximately.

Makeshift weapons and salvaged firearms, all of it pointed in our direction, all of it actively being used.

And one of them, in the specific moment I happened to be looking, was drawing his arm back with a cloth-stuffed bottle trailing a lit wick that I recognised immediately and viscerally from every piece of media that had ever depicted one.

Eyes widening at the sight, I pulled back behind the car as fast as I could.

"Molotov—*move!*"

The words had barely left my mouth when we were all moving.

There was no deliberation in it, no processing lag—just bodies responding to information at the speed that survival required, everyone scrambling away from the car in whatever direction had the most immediate distance to offer without jumping straight into Scav-gun line-of-sight.

Kaito got an arm under Tekda, Higgins taking the other, and moved him hard and fast toward the apartment building entrance, and it was only in that lurching, half-stumbling scramble that I clocked what I'd missed entirely in the chaos of the exit—Takeda wasn't moving under his own power. Wasn't moving at all.

Dead weight between them, head lolling, being physically hauled across the asphalt by Kaito's cybernetic arms with Higgins doing what he could on the other side despite whatever the car crash had done to his left flank.

The molotov hit the car's right side about a half second after I'd pulled my hand back from it.

The sound was a wet crack followed immediately by a low, spreading *whomp* as the liquid caught. Fire washed across the car's flank and spilled over onto the asphalt where we'd been crouched seconds earlier, painting the area in low, flickering orange that the neon overhead turned strange colours.

Reina caught a splash across her left forearm.

Kaito got a lick of it across the back of his jacket.

Both of them dealt with it the same way—quick, flat slaps, snuffing it out with the brisk efficiency of people who'd had worse problems in the last two minutes and had their priorities appropriately ordered.

"Into the apartment—*go!*" Higgins' voice, strained.

We went without question.

The entrance was maybe four meters from where the car had stopped, which had never felt like a meaningful distance until I was crossing it with gunfire coming from behind me and two thirds of the crew in various states of not entirely functional. Reina dropped back slightly, both pistols swinging up, buying the meters we needed while the rest of us closed on the door.

The math of the situation was simple and particularly unpleasant for my mental state.

'It's got to be, fuck...!'

Takeda was out. Kaito was running on fumes, spray bandaged holes and stubbornness. Higgins was hurt, and freshly so—the way he was holding his left side said something had shifted in the crash and the something wasn't small enough to just ignore.

That left two people for the combined problem of twelve Scavs and a locked door, and there was a *very* obvious division of labour when one of those two people was Reina.

I hit the door.

Right foot, full commitment, everything my Body stat could put behind it—the impact ran back up my leg and into my hip and the door didn't move in any way that suggested it had noticed.

I reset and hit it again, same result, and the second attempt told me everything the first had already said: This wasn't a door that was going to cooperate like this.

Exterior doors in Neo Avalis were built with exactly this scenario in mind, because if they weren't, nobody would pay rent to live behind them. Kicking your way into a residential building being a realistic option was bad for the entire concept of residential buildings when Scavs were as plentiful as they were.

I swept the immediate area for anything useful: A length of pipe, a pry bar, *anything* with mechanical advantage.

The alcove offered nothing but grime and old signage bolted flat to the wall.

I couldn't pull out my deck and go for a quick-hack on the biometric lock either, as that would take far too long—so I made a decision. One that I would likely regret at some point, but as long as that point was not within the next minute or ten, that was fine with current-Ela.

"Reina." I didn't look back at her. "*Ten seconds*. Buy me ten seconds."

A burst of gunfire from behind me was the answer.

I turned back to the door, pressed my back flat against the wall beside it, and took a breath that went all the way down.

My hands came up in front of me and I started moving my fingers.

The Sigils came easier than they used to—the hand movements settling into their shapes with a muscle-memory that hadn't existed a few weeks ago, the geometry of each gesture sitting in my fingers the way Mr. Shori had shown me back then.

I felt the Sprites respond, the ones already inside my body and the ambient ones nearby, drawn toward the motion the way current moved toward a drain.

Slowly at first, a trickle, then faster as the pattern locked in and the air around my hands began to visibly gather—not a shimmer exactly, more a *density*, a wrongness in the space immediately around my fingers that the eye kept trying to correct for and couldn't.

Something hit the door frame beside my ear. Then the wall six inches below my elbow.

I registered both as nails from a makeshift weapon, which some part of my brain filed under relevant information while the rest of it stayed exactly where it was, because the buildup was almost there and interrupting it now would mean starting over and we didn't have that kind of time.

The Anima moved through me all at once—a current, deep and cold and vast in the specific way it always was, like briefly touching something that made my own nervous system feel small and insignificant in comparison. The exhaustion came with it, the familiar drain that started behind the eyes and radiated outward, but I was already activating it—

[Anima Razor]

The air *screamed*.

The blade formed in front of my fingers in the fraction of a second before I drove it into the lock, and the metal gave way when something *significantly* more fundamental than force was applied to it—cleanly shearing through the lock housing as though it had decided to cooperate rather than been cut.

The door swung inward on its own.

I grabbed the frame to keep myself upright, breathing harder than I'd like as I stumbled through, and waved the others in behind me.

Kaito and Higgins came through first with Takeda between them, and both of them threw a look in my direction as they passed—the specific look of people who had just watched something happen that they didn't have an immediate category for.

The recalibrating attention of professionals updating a variable.

I didn't have the breath, nor time, nor intention to address any of their gazes.

Reina came last, stumbling across the threshold with one arm hanging wrong at the elbow, hand barely maintaining its grip on the pistol it was still technically holding, a steady drip of dark blood tracing the path from her forearm to the floor behind her.

She'd been hit somewhere in those ten seconds and hadn't stopped firing anyway.

I slammed the door shut behind her.

Higgins was already moving before it closed, dragging a length of broken shelving unit and a waterlogged cabinet door from the hallway debris and jamming them into the door's gap with the focused, economical movements of a man operating on a narrowing margin.

When it was done he put his back against the wall beside it, let himself lean into the rockcrete, and breathed. Slow, deep, rhythmic. Each exhale slightly longer than the one before it, like he was manually talking his own system down from something.

The hallway was dim and smelled damp and old, and somewhere underneath it all, like something electrical that had been burning for a long time.

Outside, the gunfire had finally paused...