

Chapter 108 - Animi Motus

The instant I flipped the switch and let my Ego disengage, I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

The floodgates burst open.

Every emotion I had forcibly shoved down over the past hours came crashing into me all at once, a tidal wave of fear, guilt, pain, and exhaustion that threatened to drown me whole.

I had known this was coming. I had braced myself—had even deliberately sat down on the shower floor, knowing damn well my legs wouldn't hold me once the weight of it all hit. But even with all that preparation, I was completely unprepared for just how much it would *hurt*.

My vision blurred as a surge of nausea rolled through me, twisting my stomach into knots. Before I could stop it, my body lurched forward, and I threw up onto the floor, my entire frame shaking violently.

The heat from the shower did little to soothe the ice-cold tremors wracking my limbs.

A ragged sob forced its way out of my throat, barely distinguishable from the rasping gasps I was sucking in between the aftershocks of vomiting. My hands curled into weak fists, nails pressing into my palms—not in some attempt to ground myself, but because my body had no idea what else to do with itself.

The first thing that hit me—hard and fast—was fear.

Not the quiet, creeping fear that lurked in the back of my mind when I was in danger, but raw, animalistic *terror*.

It dragged me back to that moment in the side-street, when the mocking voice had slithered through the air, stopping Jade and me dead in our tracks.

My chest tightened as I relived the way my stomach had dropped, the cold sweat prickling at the back of my neck as two massive enforcers stepped out to block our only escape.

I had known we were fucked the second I saw them.

My breath hitched as the memory of Carinola Valir's voice echoed in my skull, dripping with contempt. *"Look who thought they could just come to my house, cripple my son, and then walk away scot-free, boys."*

The absolute certainty in her tone—the way she spoke as if our deaths were already decided—had settled in my gut like a lead weight.

There had been no running. No talking our way out of it.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but it did nothing to block out the moment Jade had muttered her name under her breath, her voice tight with panic. “*A fucking Talon, Ela. We **can’t** fight her. She’ll kill us both without breaking a sweat.*”

I had already known we were outmatched.

But hearing it confirmed with such certainty? That had been something else entirely.

Dread curled around my ribs like a vice, crushing the air from my lungs. Valir hadn’t been some low-level thug with a grudge. She was something else entirely—a cybernetically enhanced *monster* who had already decided we were dead the moment she laid eyes on us.

And yet... I’d still had to try.

A shudder ran through me as the memory shifted, dragging me back into that fight.

The fear I’d felt when I first squared off against the enforcer was different—quieter, but no less suffocating.

It was the kind of fear that clung to my bones, sinking into the marrow as I stared down a man who towered over me, wielding two knives that were anything but low-tier street trash.

I had known I wasn’t ready for any of this.

My hands clenched harder, the ghost of my vibro-blade’s weight settling into my palm like it had never left. I had tried to keep my distance, to use my blade’s reach to my advantage, but I had never fought anyone like him before.

Hell, I had never fought anyone for real before—not in a way that actually meant life or death.

And I hadn’t *wanted* to, either.

Even as he came at me with the singular goal of spilling my guts onto the pavement, even as my blade cut through the air in desperate defense, I had still been trying to fight without crossing that final line. That red line in the sand I had drawn for myself, one I refused to step over, no matter how pressed I was.

Because I *hated* violence.

How could I not?

When you grow up with it—when it follows you from room to room, breathing down your neck, waiting for the smallest mistake to justify itself—you don’t crave it. You don’t seek it out.

You *fear* it.

You *run* from it.

You shrink from the sound of raised voices, from the heavy footfalls in the hall, from the moments when something small snaps and suddenly your whole world comes crashing down, again and again and again, turning what should be safety to life-threatening danger.

And yet, sometimes...

Sometimes it's the only thing left.

The yelling. The screams. The sound of flesh hitting flesh, and the moment you realize there's no one coming to stop it... *ever*. The silence that follows, stretched so long and thin that it starts to feel like peace—until you realize it isn't.

Because, finally, the weight of something *irreversible* settles over you.

The crushing, debilitating weight that is the realisation that the only way out, is to become the very thing you've always hated; to do the very thing you've always feared would happen to you.

Guilt. Pain. Sorrow.

Nothing else ever follows.

The very kind that doesn't fade, no matter how many years or lifetimes pass.

The very kind that doesn't fade, no matter how much the therapists tell you it will get better.

The very kind that doesn't fade, no matter how much you lock yourself into a cage and stare at the happy people through the bars, imagining if this could be you, if things had been different.

And still...

That red line had *cost* me.

Pain flared in my side, sharp and phantom, as my mind replayed the moment he had slipped through my guard and buried his knife into my flesh. My breath hitched as my forearm burned, reliving the slice of his second blade as it tore through muscle.

That red line I had clung to so desperately had nearly been the death of me.

I had been losing. Losing *badly*.

And worse than that—I had put Jade in danger, for no reason other than my own hesitations.

Regret hit me like a hammer to the ribs, sending a fresh wave of nausea roiling through my gut and onto the floor, leaving me gasping for air as my lungs burned.

I hadn't taken things seriously when I should have.

I had hesitated, had wasted time trying to fight like this was anything but a life-or-death battle, simply because I had feared what would become of me again, if I hadn't.

Because of that, I had nearly died.

Because of that, Jade had almost been slaughtered.

I could still see it.

The image of Jade on the ground, scrambling backward, her hands slipping in her own blood as the enforcer loomed over her—it wouldn't leave my head. The sheer panic in her eyes, the way she had clawed at the ground to get away, to survive, knowing she couldn't stop what was coming.

She had been utterly terrified.

Because of me.

Not because I had been too weak. Not because I had been incapable of stopping it.

But because I had made the *choice* not to end things sooner.

I had clung to some naive hope that I could make it through without taking a life, as if I wasn't already in the middle of a kill-or-be-killed scenario. As if I had the luxury of morality; as if Jade had had the luxury of my morality.

I had the better gear. I had the better weapon.

Even if my technique was sloppier, even if my footwork was off, none of it mattered when I was holding a vibroblade—when one singular, solid hit could've ended that fight before he ever got close enough to cut me open.

And yet I had let it go on. I had let myself bleed for my hesitation.

A fresh sob ripped through me, my entire body convulsing under the weight of it. My teeth clenched, my nails dug into my palms, but nothing could stop the shaking, the overwhelming wrongness clawing up my throat once again, like an alien parasite trying to break free.

This was my fault.

I could still feel the moment everything shifted.

When the fear had stopped controlling me—or maybe had simply gotten too overbearing, I can't tell—the moment I had flipped the switch.

When I had given my Ego one, single command.

A command I never should have given in that way, for there had been many other choices, but a command that came from the depths of my soul.

The very command I was most familiar with, to escape an inescapable situation: "*Kill.*"

The sheer coldness of it sent ice crawling down my spine.

I had let go of *everything*.

Every hesitation. Every moral hang-up. Every part of me that had still been clinging to the idea that I could get through this without ending a life.

Every single second, minute and hour spent, telling myself that there had been no other way; that what the therapists said was true, that it wasn't my fault; that I should forgive myself.

I had let go of all of it, not just crossing, but erasing the red line.

And the second I had done that... the fight had ended.

I had cut him down without mercy. Without thought.

Far beyond the point where he had been incapable of hurting me or Jade, far beyond the point of having won the fight, I had cut him down regardless...

The phantom weight of his severed head hit the floor in my mind, and bile rose in my throat, but by now I was too exhausted to eject it forcefully, so instead, it simply dribbled out.

I had killed him.

I had killed both of them.

And I hadn't felt a thing.

Not guilt. Not sorrow. Not even satisfaction.

Just cold, calculating purpose.

That was all it had been.

Just the singular, undeniable fact that I had ordered my Ego to *kill*, and it had obeyed. And now, stripped of its control, I was finally forced to confront the truth—the horrifying realization that the absence of guilt hadn't been *because* of my Ego.

It wasn't something it had shielded me from.

It was something that simply... wasn't there to begin with.

A raw, broken sob tore out of me, my forehead pressing against the slick shower floor as I gasped for breath, struggling against the spiraling mess of emotions that crashed over me in waves.

Fear. Regret. Self-loathing.

I wanted to tell myself that the only reason I hadn't felt anything was because I had been too deep in survival mode, too overwhelmed by the fight itself.

But that was a lie.

I *knew* it was a lie.

Because even now, as I lay here drowning in everything else—Jade’s terror, my own near-death, the sheer stupidity of how close I had come to losing this second chance—there was still no sorrow for them.

No guilt for the ones I had killed.

Nothing.

A fresh wave of nausea rolled through me, my body convulsing as I dry-heaved, my throat raw and burning, the taste of bile thick on my tongue. At some point, I must have screamed myself hoarse, my voice now nothing more than a weak rasp, my breath hitching and stuttering as I tried—and failed—to swallow.

Drool slipped past my lips, pooling on the tiles beside me, but I barely even noticed.

I had thought I was just running from violence.

But maybe... maybe I had been running from *myself* all along.

From the fact that something inside me had snapped that day, fractured in a way that could never be put back together—no matter how many second chances the universe decided to throw my way.

That whatever I had lost back then, whatever had been stripped from me in that moment, was *gone*. Permanently. Irreversibly.

That the people I saw through the bars weren’t just different from me, in a figurative sense.

They were an entirely different kind of species.

And no matter how much I tried, no matter how much I begged and pleaded, no matter how many times I reached through the bars of that divide, desperately grasping for anyone to rescue me and pull me through, I would never be one of them again.

Because some things, once broken, could never be put back together; some things were never meant to be fixed.

And still, the emotions kept coming.

The flood that had been kept at bay by my Ego didn’t stop at just the battle—it was everything. Every single moment I had suppressed, every flicker of terror, of helplessness, of raw, unfiltered fear that I hadn’t let myself feel in the moment.

The memory of Valir’s foot slamming into my chest sent phantom pain lancing through my ribs, a ghost of the moment my body had crumpled under the sheer force.

The sheer, paralyzing terror of realizing—in that split-second of weightlessness before I hit the ground—that I was going to die. That I was fragile, just another bag of flesh and bone that could be snapped in half like a dry twig under someone else’s heel.

I sucked in a sharp breath, feeling my throat tighten, my lungs fighting against the phantom pressure of crushed ribs.

And then—worse than that—the moment I had been forced to watch.

Lying on the ground, gasping for breath, unable to do anything, as Valir walked toward Jade with all the patience in the world, savoring the moment, the promise of cruelty glinting in her eyes.

She had wanted me to watch. She had wanted me to suffer.

I had tried. I had *tried* to pull her attention back, to make her focus on me instead.

The words I had thrown at her were barely more than desperate, gasping insults, but they had been my only weapon. And the cold realization that settled in then, but had been suppressed until now, was still settling into my bones:

“I didn’t care whether I died or not.”

Not in that moment. Not if it meant Jade would live.

My fingers curled against the tile floor as my breathing turned ragged once more.

I had barely known her.

She was still a stranger, wasn’t she?

We had gone through a lot, more than I had ever gone through with anyone else, in either of my lives. More than any meagre friendship I had managed to hold onto in the past, more than any connection I had ever formed.

And yet, she was still the person Vega had sent to spy on me.

And I had known that. I knew that.

Yet I had still fought for her like my life meant nothing in comparison.

Why?

Why had I clung so desperately to the first real person who had shared time with me in this new life?

Was it because she was the first person who had talked to me, who had been there through all the insanity, through all the fights, through all the blood and death?

Was it because she had saved me just as much as I had saved her?

Or was it something even simpler?

The only other answer—the one I *really* didn’t want to consider—whispered at the edges of my mind, slipping in through the cracks of my unraveling thoughts.

"Do I want to die?"

The answer should have been simple. *"No."*

But was that true?

I had told myself it was, over and over, but the question lingered.

Like an itch I couldn't scratch, a splinter buried too deep to pull out. Because if I really, truly cared about living, would I have acted the way I did?

Would I have taunted Valir, knowing damn well I had no way of fighting her? Would I have forced her attention onto me, let her take me instead of Jade, like it was a foregone conclusion?

Were those the actions of someone who actually wanted to make it out alive?

The thought clawed at me, gnawed at the edges of everything I had been holding onto.

And still, the emotions kept coming.

My thoughts barely had time to form, much less find satisfying conclusions, before the next wave crashed into me—drowning out logic, burying me under their weight.

The exhaustion—the raw, physical exhaustion—was starting to pull at me now too, my body sluggish from the surgery, the blood loss, the sheer hell I had put it through. I could feel it creeping in, that bone-deep tiredness that whispered at me to just let go.

But the emotions didn't care.

Somewhere in the middle of the storm, between the fear and the regret and the crushing weight of every decision that had led me to that moment, there had been something else—something almost foreign compared to the rest. *Relief.*

I could still feel it, like a ghost of warmth in the hollow of my chest. That moment, that single moment, when I had looked up from the ground, convinced that I was about to watch Jade die in front of me, only to hear her voice—sharp, commanding, undeniable.

"Not one step closer towards her, Valir, or you'll be breathing through your fucking forehead."

Citrina.

I had barely been able to process it, too caught up in my own panic and pain, but I remembered the way it had felt. That brief, flickering moment of disbelief, followed by the kind of gratitude so intense it nearly hurt.

And then Liliana had spoken. And suddenly, everything had changed.

Valir, the unshakable force, the monster I had been certain would be my end, had paused. Had actually hesitated.

And for the first time since the fight began, there had been a sliver of hope.

That moment stretched in my mind, replaying again and again, over and over, like my brain couldn't quite accept it. That realization that we weren't going to die. That no matter how bad things had gotten, something—someone—had changed our fate.

And then, just as quickly, confusion.

Because the conversation that followed? It had made no sense.

The talk of rules, of "Ones," of gang politics that I didn't understand. The way Valir had snarled but backed off regardless, leaving Jade and me bleeding in the street instead of finishing what she started.

I had been numb after that. The relief so overwhelming it left me hollow. The kind of emotional whiplash that was too much to process all at once, so instead, I had just... shut down.

At least, until I saw it.

The shard.

The System Notification that couldn't have—*shouldn't have*—existed.

Even now, lying on the shower floor, my body trembling from the weight of everything, I could still recall the spike of sheer, raw elation at seeing it appear in my inventory.

That wasn't just relief—that was victory.

But it hadn't been just excitement. There had been something else, buried underneath it as well. A quiet, creeping thread of fear that had been growing for days and weeks now.

Because if *this* could happen—if the System could create things in the real world, not just the digital one, out of thin fucking air—then what else was it capable of?

The fear had followed me into unconsciousness, twisting through my already chaotic thoughts.

And then I had woken up—violently, suddenly, in Misha's kitchen—Jade's voice ringing in my ears, screaming my name.

Screaming that I was her *friend*.

That moment burned through me like a brand, the way her voice had cracked, the sheer desperation in it. And it had hit me harder than I'd expected.

Because Jade... Jade had been there since the start. She had been watching me, spying on me, feeding information back to Vega. I knew this. I had never forgotten it.

And yet—

And yet, in that moment, with my blood pooling around me, with her hands shaking and her voice breaking as she begged me not to die—

She hadn't been lying.

Something in me had fluttered, something that had nothing to do with the fear or the exhaustion or the System. Because for the first time since waking up in this world, I wasn't just someone's target. I wasn't a pawn in a game I didn't understand.

I was Ela.

I was her friend, and she meant that.

And for a second—just a second—that had been enough.

Until the fear came roaring back.

Because even if Jade cared, even if she meant every *word*—what did it matter, if I bled out in front of her anyway?

The desperation had sunk its claws into me then, just as deeply as it had in the street with Valir.

I couldn't die. I refused to die. Not after hearing that.

And then a thought—[Serenity]

The Perk I had chosen all those weeks ago, almost at a whim, had not managed to pull its weight when I needed it during the NeuroCorpse issue, that I had almost regretted wasting my precious point on... It saved me.

But there had been no time to process that relief. Because they were going to return any second. The Ripper. Misha.

And Jade had already seen too much.

The fear hit me like a freight train. A different kind of fear than before. Not the gut-wrenching terror of dying on the street, or the helpless panic of watching Valir close in on Jade with a knife in hand.

This was a cold, creeping horror.

A realization that I had no excusable way to explain what had just happened.

Because how do you explain to someone that your blood just disappeared? How do you explain that you bled out on a table one second and then, the next, not a single drop was left behind?

Jade had already started to question it.

And if she had noticed—if she had pieced together that something unnatural had happened, even despite her emotional state—then the Ripper would know too.

Of that, there was no doubt. And I couldn't let that happen.

I had given my Ego a new job. Something simple, something crucial.

"Keep my secrets safe."

But the moment I had done so, it had given me an idea that made my stomach drop through the floor.

"Slit her throat."

Not because I wanted to. Not because I would ever seriously consider it, not after everything I had just done to keep her alive, not after what I had heard from her in my half-conscious haze, the sheer desperation in her voice as she had cried over me.

No—my Ego didn't care about any of that. It had simply taken the most efficient route.

If Jade was dead, she couldn't question me. If Jade was dead, there was no loose end.

I nearly shut my Ego off again right then and there, the horror I should have felt back then, now clawing up my throat like bile. But I couldn't do that at the time.

Not then. Not while I still needed it.

So I did the only thing I could do—I gave it a new job. A better one.

"Keep my secrets safe. Without hurting anyone."

And then, I scrambled.

I fought past the exhaustion, past the weakness in my limbs, past the overwhelming desire to just lie down and let sleep take me because I had to fix this.

The injectors. It was my only shot.

Jade hadn't used a coagulant on me. The Ripper would know the second he opened me up that I shouldn't have stopped bleeding. But if I could give them something—anything—that made sense, then maybe, just maybe, I could contain this mess.

I begged Jade with what little breath I had left. *"Break it. Spill it. Lie for me. Please."*

She had hesitated, and for a *horrifying* moment, I had thought she wouldn't do it. That she would keep pressing, that she would demand answers I couldn't give, that she would force me into a corner where I would have to choose between telling the truth or letting my Ego handle it in the most efficient way possible.

But she had understood.

Maybe not why I needed her to do it, maybe not how any of it made sense, but she had done it anyway. And the memory of the injector shattering against the table, the flood of relief that followed, almost knocked me out entirely as I clawed at the shower walls, trying to keep myself anchored to reality in some shape or form.

But I hadn't been in the clear, even with Jade's help.

The Ripper would still know.

The missing blood—maybe he would overlook it, considering the constant washing of hands, the disposable covers for tools and gloves, the focus on keeping me alive to get his payday...

Maybe.

It was a long shot. But none of it mattered if I could just keep the questions to a minimum.

If I could just make sure that the number of people who could pick apart what had happened here stayed small.

Even if it meant keeping Misha in the dark. Even if it meant letting her believe whatever half-baked story Jade had spun about the injector.

Because this—this wasn't about trust. This was about survival.

And not just mine, but all of ours.

If any corporation caught wind of the System—if they so much as suspected its existence—they would never stop coming. Not until they had torn my body apart, piece by piece, to pick through whatever made me different.

If Jade knew. If Misha knew. They wouldn't be safe.

Anywhere.

No hole deep enough. No fortress strong enough. No amount of planning or firepower would be able to protect them from what a corp would do to secure something like this.

And I—I wouldn't be able to stop it. Not now. Maybe not ever.

So it didn't matter if I wanted to trust them. If I wanted to tell them everything, to let someone else shoulder even a fraction of the weight pressing down on me every single day.

I couldn't.

Because the second I did, their lives would no longer belong to them.

And I wasn't about to risk that—even if it meant lying to Misha. Even if it meant hiding things from Jade, making up stories, weaving half-truths and convenient explanations to cover the cracks.

But the flood had slowed.

The crushing tidal wave of fear, guilt, and regret had finally begun to recede, leaving me wrung out and empty in its wake. My body was beyond exhausted, completely out of energy, every cell in me running on fumes.

The steaming hot water pounded down onto my back, yet I shivered violently beneath it, my limbs leaden and useless. My face remained pressed against the tile, too drained to even lift it a centimeter.

I was *done*.

And yet... The last emotions trickled in regardless.

Not the screaming, suffocating ones. Not the ones that clawed and bit and tore at the inside of my chest. Not the ones that threatened to unravel who I was a person, that threatened to rip apart the thin veil of what we called sanity.

No, these were *different*.

These were good. So good they were indescribable. So good they nearly sent me spiraling into a whole new kind of sobbing. That moment, when Jade had stepped out with the Ripper to handle the payment, and Misha had been there with me.

Just the two of us.

When she had bared her thoughts to me, the walls around her dropping for real, for the first time. When she had leaned in and pressed her forehead to mine. When she had *accepted* me.

Despite everything strange about me. Despite being a completely different species. Despite the barriers in communication, the oddities, the uncertainty.

She had accepted me anyway.

That was all I had ever wanted, wasn't it?

Not necessarily to break free of the cage. But to find someone else inside it with me.

Someone who wasn't like the people beyond the bars. Someone who saw me. Someone who understood, not through words alone, but through experience, through pain, through loneliness.

Misha was different, but she wasn't *separate*.

She had been caged too—maybe not in the same way, but in the way that mattered. A cage of her own making, a cage forced on her by circumstance, by a world that never quite let her belong.

Yet she hadn't given up.

She wasn't weak and afraid like me, desperately clawing for meaning while running from everything else; from who she was or wanted to be.

Misha was *strong*.

And more than that—she was willing to *share* that strength, even toss it aside and be vulnerable to a complete stranger like me; something I could never do.

I sobbed—deep, shaking sobs that wracked my entire body, rattling my ribs and making me tremble under the scorching water. But this time, they weren't just sobs of grief or pain or regret.

They were sobs of something else. Something lighter.

Because for the first time, in a long time—maybe ever—I felt like I wasn't completely alone.

I had found someone else behind the bars.

And for the first time, even if just for a little while, I let myself believe that was enough...