

Chapter 182 - Pieces

I stayed in bed for another hour and a half to fully allow my body to boot up and get used to the consistent, dull pain echoing throughout my entire body.

Eventually, though, I made the executive decision that lingering any longer than that was purely racking up line items for the Ripper, and got up.

The patient's gown clinging to my body caught me off-guard for a half-second before I fully processed why I was wearing one—yes, I was *in-fact* a patient—which said something unflattering about my current cognitive speed.

Somebody had folded my actual Operator clothes and set them on the chair beside the bed.

I reached for them with hands that were stiff in the specific, deep-joint way the Ripper had warned me about.

I started changing, caught a glimpse of myself in the narrow mirror on the wall, and stopped.

'Right... That's a thing...'

Fresh surgical lines across my chest, two of them, where the Ripper had gone in to set the ribs properly.

They were already fading at the edges—whatever scar-diminisher he'd applied was clearly doing its job, the skin knitting back with the assisted efficiency of good post-operative product—but they were recent enough to still be visible. Still pink and carrying the particular newness of damage that hadn't fully decided what it was going to leave behind yet.

I looked at them for a moment longer than was fully necessary to process that they were there.

The Rest Function had been running quietly in the background since the first night I'd spent in this world, so consistent and so automatic that I'd stopped registering it as a distinct thing at all—just a given, like fucking gravity.

It had been patching me up after every gig, every training session, every time the world had taken a piece out of me and I'd gone to sleep and woken up considerably less worse for wear than the evening prior.

Keeping the damage from compounding. Keeping the record—as in, *my body*—clean.

'Been taking you completely for granted, huh?' I thought, looking at the two lines on my chest with a new kind of attention. *'Not even really appreciating that you've been keeping this body goddamn **pristine** the whole time. Every hit, every cut, every stupid decision I'd made in a dojo session somewhere that should've left something permanent...'*

I thought of the Ripper at Misha's place, the work they'd done, what the scarring from that visit alone would've looked like without the Rest Function running overnight to mitigate it.

'That would've been a serious fucking scar. No amount of scar-diminisher fixes that kind of invasive surgery completely...'

And now it was gone. Offline with no estimated return window.

'Only really know what you had when it's gone, huh.'

I pulled my shirt on carefully, working around the stiffness in my hands, and let the thought settle into whatever compartment it belonged in.

The one genuinely silver-lining adjacent thing—and I was aware it was a stretch to call it that, but I was taking what I could get at the moment—was that [Lightfoot] had apparently gone down with everything else.

First time since I'd gotten it that the Perk wasn't running its quiet erasure of any traces—and thus, biological evidence—I left behind.

Which, under normal circumstances, was an inconvenience.

Under these specific circumstances though, it meant the Ripper wasn't going to begin post-operative clean up and abruptly find himself staring at a workspace that had just been used on a patient and contained precisely *zero* things to clean up of that patient's very bloody existence.

That particular conversation—or rather, the particular set of very uncomfortable questions it would've generated—was one I could very much do without adding to the current list.

*'Still have to deal with Misha's Ripper eventually,' I mused, working the zipper of my pants with fingers that were registering their displeasure at the fine motor requirement. 'They've undoubtedly got that information sitting in a file somewhere... Can't just leave that loose end running indefinitely. Need to get a proper read on them one of these days—figure out what they know, what they'd do with it, whether they're the type to keep their mouth shut for professional reasons or the type that needs a different kind of incentive... Not that I **want** to go threaten a Ripper, but...'*

Just one more item for a list that was getting so long, I was starting to lose track of where it even started.

I made it as far as the door before I almost walked *directly* into Reina.

She pulled up short, I pulled up short, and we spent a brief moment recalibrating in the doorway.

"Ah, good. Was just coming to get you, actually," she said, then her eyes drifted away from my face as she added, "Higgins is awake."

The words came out level enough.

The rest of her didn't *quite* match—the set of her shoulders, the particular quality of stillness she was holding herself in, the way she'd said his name with that same barely-there resistance I'd noticed before.

The survivor's guilt clearly wasn't going anywhere.

If anything, it looked like it had spent the last hour and a half getting more settled in.

I felt a quiet, genuine ache for her, but decided not to say anything about it—of all the people that could help with this kind of issue, I was definitely the absolute last.

"Lead the way," I said instead.

—

Higgins was sitting up when we came in, which was more than I'd been prepared for and which I chose to take as a good sign.

He looked like a man who had been through something serious and was doing the work of being present anyway—pale, careful in his movements, the specific action economy of someone managing pain by not inviting it.

'I should try that, someday. You know, like not inviting pain? Might be a smart way to live...'

His eyes tracked to us as we entered, and something in them shifted in the way of a person who'd been alone with their thoughts for too long and was relieved to have somewhere else to put their attention.

"Ela-san," he said with a smile, "Welcome back, Reina."

"Higgins," I said with a nod. "You look fucking terrible."

"And you look marginally better than terrible, as well," he replied, which from Higgins, in this context, was downright effusive. "How are you?"

"Ribs got cracked and fractured. But they're present, I guess." I found the chair beside the bed and lowered myself into it at the speed my ribs considered acceptable. "How's—how are you doing?"

It was a stupid question, that I realized the very moment it left my mouth, given the blanket and what was very visibly *not* underneath it, but Higgins absorbed it without making me feel worse about asking—god bless him.

"Alive," he said with a lop-sided smile. "Which I believe is attributable to several people in this room."

The silence that followed had a slightly awkward shape to it that none of us immediately moved to fill.

But then Higgins bowed his head, deep. Towards both Reina and I.

"I owe you both a sincere apology," he said, to the middle distance between us. "The research on this gig was my responsibility. Vetting the job before we took it—my responsibility. I *should* have caught the Scrapwright affiliation... Should have dug until I found it, or walked away from the gig for insufficient intel."

He paused, and the pause had the quality of someone who had been rehearsing this and had decided to say it plainly anyway. "I nearly got all of us killed. If you two hadn't been there... If Ela-san hadn't been with us—"

He stopped once more, before taking a deep breath and starting again after a moment, looking directly at me this time. "We were very fortunate to have you with us."

I sat with that unexpected turn of events for a brief moment.

The honest response—the one that had been assembling itself over the last hour and a half of lying in the Ripper's bed with nothing to do but run post-mortems—was that Higgins wasn't the only one who'd dropped the ball here.

A Runner with a developed toolkit and half a brain about operational security would have thought about blocking outgoing communications from the safehouse the moment the breach had started. Cut the Scav's ability to send an emergency ping to their backup crews before we'd even finished clearing the first room—even if we didn't know if they had any backup crews in the first place.

It was basic logic. It was the kind of thing that should have been downright automatic, and it hadn't even *occurred* to me until I was horizontal, medicated out the ass and had nothing but time to consider my ever-present failings once again.

My Runner toolkit was thoroughly underdeveloped in ways that this gig had made very, *very* clear, and the gap between what I *could* theoretically do versus what I had actually brought with me to the gig, had cost us in ways I was still not entirely done tallying up.

But... Higgins didn't need that information right now—or ever.

'As shitty as it is... I have to watch out for myself, first and foremost. I can't tank my Runner rep on the very first gig I do as a one. That would kill the chance for any future gigs...'

I had to be pragmatic here, as much as it made me sick to my stomach to make that call.

"There's not much anyone could have done differently, given what we were working with, Higgins," I ultimately chose to say instead—dipping into [Negotiation] to find the right path for "*nobody is to blame here, but the one that opened the gig*".

"Cryo recommended you for a reason, and I don't have any doubts you did your due diligence. If the Scrapwright affiliation didn't surface in your usual workup, that's not a failure of effort—something specifically *made* it hard to find. Either the gig opener buried it deliberately, or the trail was clean enough that it would've fooled most people doing the same type of research."

I leaned forward slightly, trying to drive home the point, "And, frankly, the damn OPN *should* have caught it before it ever even landed on the board for you to find. If they'd known it was a fucking Scrapwright operation, they'd have flagged it—bumped the risk tier, adjusted the payout, denied it outright, *something*. There's no way they push out a gig like *this* with a standard listing and no warning attached; not knowingly, at least. Which means either they didn't do their due diligence—which I seriously doubt, or someone *made sure* they didn't. catch anything"

Higgins looked at me for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

Something in his expression didn't fully release—the self-assessment sitting underneath it wasn't going anywhere just because I'd offered him an out, I knew that much from experience—but the acute edge of it settled slightly.

"Either way," I added quietly, "we're all still here."

'*Mostly*,' said the part of me that couldn't help where its eyes went.

I kept that one to myself.

"You're right," Higgins finally said, before abruptly pulling the blanket away.

I couldn't stop my eyes from going there for exactly one second—the single remaining leg, the neatly dressed stump sitting just below the hip where the other one had been, the clean, professional work of a Ripper who'd had to make the best of a situation that hadn't left him many options—and then I forced my gaze to Higgins' face and kept it there.

"Let's go talk to the others," he said. "Dex should be able to wake them up, even briefly. Better to get everyone in the same room and figure out how we're moving forward from here. Get a proper consensus."

He shifted toward the edge of the bed.

Reina and I both took an instinctive half-step forward at exactly the same moment, and then both stopped at exactly the same moment as well, because neither of us had *any* idea what helping actually looked like from here.

Higgins looked at the two of us—frozen mid-step, functionally useless in perfect synchronization—and something crossed his face that quickly resolved into a short, genuine chuckle.

"It's fine, you two. Thank you." He shook his head slightly. "I'll have to get used to this sooner rather than later. Might as well start now..."

He reached down into the gap between the mattress and the bed frame and produced a crutch from somewhere in there that neither of us had apparently noticed.

The first attempt at standing was unsteady—the exact logistics of weight distribution clearly announcing itself as something that was going to require some getting used to—but Higgins

worked through it with the focused patience of someone taking an honest first assessment of a new problem, and after a few adjustments found something that held.

"Dex brought it over earlier," he said, nodding toward the crutch in answer to the question neither of us had actually asked out loud yet. "He wants the beds cleared as quickly as reasonably possible, so... Incentive to get moving, I guess."

He slowly walked out of the room, while Reina and I simply followed behind him.

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The now four of us made our way down the hall in a configuration that could, if one was being particularly generous, be described as mobile.

Higgins led on the crutch, moving with the careful, recalibrating gait of someone actively learning something new and refusing to let the learning curve show more than necessary.

Reina and I now had Kaito between us—one arm each, his weight distributed across our shoulders with the cooperative looseness of a man who was *technically* awake and ambulatory but was running those functions on significantly reduced processing power.

The Ripper had brought him up from the medically induced sleep at Higgins' request, and Kaito had greeted consciousness with the specific, slightly unfocused goodwill of someone who wasn't entirely sure what room he was in but had thankfully decided to be very pleasant about it.

He was—if I had to put numbers on it—catching about sixty percent of what was said to him and responding to roughly forty percent of that, which the remaining part of his brain was apparently rounding up to being barely functional.

The Ripper walked with us in the way of someone who had *strong* opinions about the current situation and was airing them *continuously*.

"I do *not* support the Patient being ambulatory at this stage," he said, for what I was fairly certain was the third time since we'd left the room.

He appeared to be referring to Kaito, insofar as the Ripper referred to anyone specifically, which he didn't—everyone in his professional purview apparently existed as the Patient—not just me—a categorization that flattened all distinguishing features into a single clinical noun and seemed to cause him no difficulty whatsoever.

I had eventually worked out that his name was Dex from a combination of context clues—as in, Higgins had mentioned it several times—and the name on the door above his office that we had visited earlier to get him to help with Kaito's sleep, a deduction I was privately *quite* pleased with given that my brain was currently operating somewhere heavily below its usual capacity.

'Blaming the lack of oxygen inside my head for that one... These fucking ribs, man.'

"Noted," said Higgins. Same tone he'd used the first two times.

We finally reached Takeda's door.

"I *also* do not support waking the Patient," Dex said, seamlessly transitioning to the next item on his list of objections. This particular Patient, I was *fairly* sure, was referring to Takeda this time. "The Patient is in a medically induced state for *reasons* that are current and valid. Disrupting that state carries a high risk of additional damage being inflicted."

Higgins exhaled through his nose—the third sigh in as many minutes, each one marginally more resigned than the last. "Is the additional damage likely to be permanent, Dex?"

Dex considered this with the brief, focused attention he gave everything. "The damage risk from forced waking would be to the same neural regions the Patient has already sustained injury to... The regions I cannot preserve regardless of intervention."

"So the parts that need replacing anyway."

Dex paused slightly longer this time, carrying the reluctant quality of a professional being walked toward a conclusion by someone else's logic. Then, the Ripper exhaled. "...Yes. The Patient will require replacement of those components regardless of outcome. The incremental risk from waking is—contained to the same territory."

Higgins nodded once. "Wake him up, then. Please."

Dex's expression didn't change.

He opened the door, crossed to the bed, and administered a sequence of injections with the brisk efficiency of someone who had registered their objection, been overruled, and was now simply executing. He capped the last injector, set it aside, and came back towards the door.

"The Patient will be conscious in approximately one to two minutes," he said, to the hallway generally, rather than any specific person. "Disorientation is expected and will resolve. Do not overstimulate."

He paused at the threshold of the door. "I do *not* support this decision."

Then he left, walking down the hallway back towards his office.

Higgins wasted no time and asked the rest of us to wait outside—too many people in the room at once, he said, and Takeda-san deserved the chance to get his bearings without an audience.

So we waited in the corridor, Kaito using the wall for support with the improving coordination of someone whose body was gradually remembering what it was actually supposed to be doing, and Reina standing with her good arm crossed over the sling in the particular stillness she defaulted to when she had nothing useful to do with her hands.

Ten minutes passed, possibly a few more, before things moved again.

The door opened and Higgins looked out at us. "Come in."

Kaito had graduated to mostly self-propelled by the time we filed through the door, which was a genuinely good-to-see improvement.

My full attention went to the bed the moment we entered, however, and *stayed* there.

[First-Aid] didn't ask permission. It ran its assessment the moment my eyes found Takeda's and delivered its read with the flat, clinical efficiency of a System that didn't adjust its output for emotional context.

The man currently propped against the headboard of the bed was Takeda, *technically*.

Same face, same build, same deep-set eyes that had a habit of making people feel like they were being quietly assessed and found adequate at best. But the quality that had made him *Takeda-san*—that specific, settled economy of movement, the sense of a man who occupied *exactly* as much space as he intended to and not a fraction more—was absent in a way that was immediately, *viscerally* obvious.

Because this Takeda was leaning, *heavily*. Not leaning to rest a weary body—leaning, with the specific, compensatory lean of a body redistributing its load because the usual internal architecture wasn't fully online—or there at all—anymore.

One side of his face also carried the unmistakable asymmetry that [First-Aid] flagged immediately and the one I would have recognised even without the Skill's help, from a hundred public health displays plastered across every piece of media in my past life.

The stroke recognition ones; the ones with the diagrams and pictures.

I kept my face as neutral as possible and felt the horrific emotional pang of it all settle somewhere deep and unhappy in my chest anyway.

Takeda, surprisingly, was the first one to speak.

The words came out slightly slurred at the edges, softened in a way that his voice had never been before—but less than I would've braced for, given everything [First-Aid] was currently telling me about his condition even from a glance.

"You all—" A brief pause, that felt a lot more like effort rather than consideration. "—look like shit..."