Chapter 179 - Triage

The narrow foyer's smell was getting worse by the second—the faint chemical sting of old building materials mixing rapidly with the sharper, more immediate smells of adrenaline, sweat and blood, the last of which was contributing more than I would've liked to the overall atmosphere.

Several wounds worth of it, freely running, all on a timeline that I'd have to try and manage.

I dropped the DuraPack before I'd fully stopped moving and had the Combo Kit out by the time I reached Reina, who had found the wall opposite Higgins and was using it with the full commitment of someone who had made an executive decision about remaining upright.

I touched her other, uninjured, arm to get a read on the situation.

[Vital Sense Report]
Vitals: Stable, deteriorating.
Main Injury: Puncture-wound, Right Shoulder, Stark Severity—Deltoid Rupture.

I kept my face neutral through what was a significant internal wince.

'*Deltoid rupture.* ***Fuck***—'

That wasn't a sleep-it-off kind of injury.

[First-Aid]'s knowledge base was pretty unambiguous on the subject—deltoid rupture meant structural damage to the muscle that anchored and drove the entire shoulder joint, which for most people was a bad time and for someone like Reina specifically was approximately the worst injury she could've drawn from the available pool.

Everything she did—the accuracy, the draw speed, the particular economy of motion that let her run two pistols simultaneously with the kind of expertise Kaito had introduced as yokai-level just hours ago—it all ran through that shoulder; through *that muscle*, specifically.

Whatever Ripper the crew used was going to have a long evening ahead of them.

"How's the pain?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

The foyer's rockcrete and bare concrete construction did exactly what that kind of architecture always did with sound—amplified it, then sent it places—and I had no interest in broadcasting the crew's condition to whatever was above us inside this random building.

Reina ground her teeth.

I could see her running the internal calculation, the same one Takeda had run, the one that ended with a gruff ”*I can handle it.*”

Then something shifted in her expression and she discarded it.

"Fucking *bad*," she said quietly, jaw visibly working her teeth. "You got something for me?"

I was already reaching for the auto-injector.

The painkiller went in smooth, the soft hiss of the mechanism doing its job, and Reina answered it with a hiss of her own as the compound hit—that specific, involuntary exhale of someone feeling the leading edge of relief arrive after a period of deciding not to acknowledge how much something hurt.

The lines around her eyes eased. Not gone entirely, but far more manageable.

"{What's the plan?}" Kaito's voice came from somewhere behind me, low and directed at Higgins—Japanese, technically, or *Nighon* if you wanted to be ND-precise about it, though in practice the distinction lived mostly in academic discussions and nowhere else. "{Where did those Scavs even fucking come from?}"

I was continuing my work on Reina.

The wound was a genuine gunshot—one of the real ones, from an actual firearm rather than the makeshift nail-throwers or railspike weapons the bulk of the Scav crew had been running, which was either very unlucky or very specifically aimed.

Small entry, no exit wound I could locate with a careful press around the shoulder's back side, which meant the round was almost certainly still in there, sitting somewhere in the muscle tissue and waiting to become someone’s longer-term problem.

Ideally mine, with more time. But ideally was definitely not on the table right now.

I packed the wound as cleanly as the kit and the conditions allowed, then picked up the micro-suture applicator and ran it across the entry point in quick, overlapping passes—the tool doing in thirty seconds what would've taken several minutes of careful handiwork, the sutures laying down in neat, even lines that held the edges together.

Spray Bandage went over the top of all of it, a generous coat, pressed flat until the seal took.

The bullet itself could wait for the Ripper. *Almost everything* could wait for the Ripper.

We just needed to somehow get to one first…

"{Likely part of a bigger crew the ones we just cleared out were affiliated with—if I had to guess,}" Higgins said, the sigh that followed it carrying more weight than just exhaustion.

His breathing had a quality to it underneath the words that I immediately clocked and set aside for later—a slight labour, a careful shallowness that suggested his ribs had very particular and strong opinions about the car crash from earlier. "{Typical, really. *Of course* we walk into one of the few organized ones… Nothing in the damn gig description flagged this, nothing came up in the research either. Don't know where the intel fell apart, but that's a problem for after we're out of this whole fucking mess…}"

"{They tracked us from the apartment? How?}"

"{No—I don't think so.}" Higgins shifted his weight against the wall, jaw tightening briefly at whatever that cost him. "{More likely they got an emergency ping from the group we hit and were already moving to reinforce by the time we finished. We were just too fast for them to catch us still inside. Bad luck put us on the same street at the same time—they were probably running a search pattern through the surrounding blocks. Could be more groups out there doing the same thing right now, before they get called in to reinforce and nail us down here.}"

"{They're Scrapwrights.}" Reina's voice came in from beside me, the painkiller having taken enough of the edge off that she could speak in full sentences without the words making her wince visibly. "{No other way they're carrying that much of their hardware. Even accounting for trade between the bands—no chance. I put down three of them, tagged a few more. Saw enough to be sure. Almost every single one had two, three Scrapwright pieces on them minimum.}"

I kept my eyes on what I was doing and said nothing.

The name didn't mean anything to me in a concrete sense—no such band had existed in the playthroughs I had seen of the game, but, then again, that was to be expected: Scav bands weren't exactly known to be a long-term investment strategy for anyone for a reason.

But the *shape* of it all was legible enough as is.

They were clearly a Scav band with a heavy focus on fabricating and jury-rigging their own equipment, large enough to have multiple crews operating across the same district, organized enough to have inter-band trade networks and emergency communication protocols.

The weapons themselves had already told most of that story—the makeshift nail-throwers, the railspike guns cobbled together from salvaged components, all of it functional in the specific way of things built by people who weren't just exclusively driven by necessity but also a slight bit of manic understanding and organization.

'*Which would also explain the biometric lock,*' I realized then. '*A band like that would definitely have at least a few guys capable of building one from scratch, and those people wouldn't exactly struggle to rewire one that already existed...*'

The picture was getting clearer, but I wasn't sure I liked what it was showing me.

"{So what are we looking at?}" Kaito said. "{We can't exactly sit in this hallway indefinitely. More of them show up—which based on what you guys just said, they *will*—we're done.}"

"{Agreed.}" Higgins exhaled carefully, one hand still pressed into his left side. "{We need an exit route and we need it *before* they can fully regroup. If the Ripper is out—}"

"{The Ripper is not out,}" Reina said flatly, temper flaring. "{I'm *not* losing this shoulder because we couldn't figure out how to get away from some gutter trash!}"

"{Nobody's losing anything, Reina. Calm down,}" Higgins said, with the measured tone of someone who had decided that particular direction of conversation wasn't productive. "{Kaito—you know this layer at all?}"

"{Vaguely… Enough, probably.}"

"{Then start thinking about alternate routes. On foot if we have to. We leave whatever is left of the car… Might have to steal one of theirs or one of the nearby resident's.}"

"{I could contact someone at the OPN, ask for an emergency gig for a driver…?"} Reina threw in.

I let the conversation wash over me as I moved to Takeda, now that Reina was as combat-capable as I could make her in the moment.

The triage for this whole situation had been a bit fucked up, but I wasn't going to feel bad about it—having Reina active and ready to shoot anyone that tried to get inside, was more important to figuring out what was going on with Takeda.

If the Scavs got inside, we were all dead, after all.

He was on the floor where Kaito and Higgins had set him down, back against the base of the wall, still in the specific way that had nothing to do with sleep or unconsciousness from a knock to the head.

I crouched beside him and let the exposed skin on my arm brush against his.

[Vital Sense Report]
Vitals: Crashing.
Main Injury: Slicing-wound, Left Arm, Stark Severity—Brachial artery, active haemorrhage.

I drew in a sharp breath, entirely involuntarily, at being hit with that diagnosis.

Three heads turned.

"What." Higgins said it like a statement, not a question.

"Not good." I was already moving, pulling the combo kit around and digging for the diagnostic strip—a flat, flexible band with a paper-thin display membrane running its length, sealed in sterile wrap that I tore open with my teeth. "Not sure just *how bad* yet. Give me a second."

I got the strip against the inside of Takeda's wrist and pressed it flat.

The display lit immediately, data populating in a running cascade down the membrane's surface, and I read it with the sinking, focused attention of someone who had been hoping for bad and gotten nothing but *worse*.

DIAGNOSTIC REPORT — SUBJECT: MALE, EST. 40-50
VITALS: ***Crashing***, deteriorating.

INJURIES DETECTED — PRIORITY ORDER:

[CRITICAL] Brachial artery, left arm—active hemorrhage. Field dressing compromised. *Immediate intervention required*.

[CRITICAL] Internal hemorrhage, thoracic cavity—suspected hepatic or splenic laceration from blunt impact trauma. Ongoing. Estimated blood loss: Moderate-severe.

[SEVERE-CRITICAL] Concussive head trauma—loss of consciousness confirmed. Duration: Ongoing. Intracranial pressure: Elevated. Epidural hemorrhaging possible, monitoring for further signs… Immediate medical attention required.

[SEVERE] Rib fractures—multiple, left lateral thoracic wall. Pneumothorax risk elevated.

[MODERATE] Soft tissue trauma, left shoulder and lateral torso.

[MODERATE] Lacerations, left forearm—field dressing present, partially compromised.

WARNING: Patient stability declining. Immediate surgical intervention recommended.

I stared at the display for a few long moments, trying to get a grasp of what I actually needed to do here—what I *could* do here, rather.

The brachial artery was *the* most immediately solvable problem and the one thing that was going to kill him fastest if I didn't address it in the next few minutes—the bandaging I'd put on earlier had held him together so far, but it definitely hadn't survived through the crash and the scramble across open asphalt in-tact.

The internal bleeding was the one that scared me the most in the long run, however, sitting in a layer of the body that the combo kit—or my actual know-how and Skills—had absolutely no meaningful answer for.

"His artery re-opened," I said, already cutting away the compromised section of gauze from his arm with the heavy-duty scissors from the kit. "And the crash gave him some *serious* internal bleeding. Thoracic—could be his liver, could be his spleen, the strip isn't specific enough to say. He needs a Ripper table asap, or he will die. I'll do what I can, but it won't be enough in the medium to long term."

I didn't need to look up to know the information had landed with the right kind of import—the heavy silence that followed had a specific weight to it that did all the talking necessary.

So I kept working.

There was a distant part of me that found it faintly surprising—how utterly calm I was.

The old version of myself had not been built for *this*.

Stressful situations had historically produced a fairly reliable sequence of events for me: The spike of adrenaline, the spiral of overthinking, the complete and total unhelpfulness of my own nervous system at the exact moment I needed it most.

And yet here I was, crouched over an unconscious man with a reopened arterial bleed and a partially collapsed lung, in a locked-down foyer with a dozen Scavs somewhere on the other side of the door intent on killing everyone inside, and my hands were *steady*.

The months inside Neo Avalis had done something fierce to my baselines, clearly.

So had [First-Aid], no doubt—not just the knowledge but the way Skill downloads rewired the relevant pathways, building competence into the body rather than just the memory. Not to mention that Edge was doing its quiet, consistent work underneath all of it, keeping the emotional temperature somewhere in the positive range of functional.

Between the three of them, they were apparently enough, combined, to not only let me operate at a level I had never considered possible for myself, but even faintly analyze this very situation… Something I was choosing, in this particular moment, not to examine *too closely*, however—on the grounds that it was working, and working was what mattered most.

The brachial artery was the clock, so that was where I started with Takeda.

I got the tourniquet on first this time—no half-measures, no pressure bandage and optimism.

The kit didn't come with one—something I was going to have very strong opinions about the next time I restocked—so I made do as best I could.

A strip of the roll bandage, doubled back on itself twice for thickness, cinched as high on the upper arm as I could get it, just below the shoulder joint.

I needed something rigid to twist against, and the folded scissor was the closest thing I had to a windlass—I slipped it under the band, rotated it until the resistance built, kept going until the band bit down hard and flat against the muscle and stopped having any give left in it.

I knotted the loose end of the bandage around the scissor to hold the tension, checked it wasn't slipping, and looked at Takeda's hand: The colour was draining out of it steadily, fingertips going from poor to pale within seconds.

‘*Good…*’

That meant it was working, which meant the artery below the band had just run out of pressure to leak with, and the clock I'd been racing had stopped ticking—at least on that particular problem.

I made a quick screenshot of the time within my cerebral interface to catch the time, [First-Aid] insisting that I get the exact minute I applied the tourniquet noted down somewhere.

"{Reina—put in the emergency gig request with the OPN, *now*. Get us backup before they just wait us out.}"

"{You got it.}"

The wound site itself was a mess compared to how I'd left it—the original bandaging had partially displaced in the scramble out of the car, the gauze compress underneath it soaked through and shifted off-center.

I peeled it back carefully, swapped in a fresh thick gauze pad pressed hard and flat against the reopened slice, and held it there with one hand while I loaded the micro-suture applicator with the other.

I ran the applicator across the length of it in two overlapping passes, the tool laying down clean lines faster than my hands could've managed, and felt the tension in my shoulders ease fractionally when the edges drew together and held.

'*Coagulant next… It should spread through the whole body and hopefully help with the internal bleeds as well, even if the majority will stick to this place here.*'

I angled the injector above the wound site, just proximal to where the artery had been leaking, and pressed the trigger—the familiar hiss, the slow spread of visible warmth under the skin as the clotting agents got to work underneath everything I'd just done on top.

"{Kaito—door. Brace it better, whatever you can find. Just block it off entirely.}"

A grunt of acknowledgement.

The sound of something heavy being dragged across concrete followed shortly after.

I layered fresh gauze over the sutures, generous thickness, then wrapped it down with a tight spiral of the roll bandage to keep everything compressed and in place. Spray bandage over the exposed edges to seal the wrap against moisture and movement.

'Better…'

Significantly better than the first attempt, and the tourniquet bought a margin that the first attempt hadn't had—mostly because it hadn't needed to, but then again: When it rained, it poured.

I moved up to his chest.

The internal bleeding was the thing I couldn't fix, not really—not here, not with this kit; or any kit, really.

What I could hopefully do was stabilize it, slow the progression, make sure whatever was leaking into the pleural cavity wasn't building pressure faster than his body could compensate.

I ripped open the seals of the trauma patch and it went straight over the right side of his chest wall, seated carefully over the area that [First-Aid] flagged as the likely leak site. I pressed the adhesive edges down firmly and held them, counting seconds, making sure the bond took against his skin before I let go.

"{I'd rather Kaito checked the far end of the floor, but—}" Higgins' voice was quieter now, the cadence of someone managing their own breathing carefully. "{—he stays close to Ela-san. I'll check the floor. There has to be a secondary exit or a window with a viable drop on the far side…}"

"{Your ribs—}"

"{Are still attached to the rest of me. I'll manage. Just *do it*.}"

The emergency blanket came out last—thin, reflective, crinkled uncomfortably loudly in the narrow foyer as I shook it open and tucked it around Takeda from the shoulders down.

My best attempt at shock prevention, or at least, whatever I could do to pass as such.

His skin was cooler than I liked and the pallor had a grey undertone that the blue light of the diagnostic strip simply made worse. The blanket wouldn't fix anything structural but it would slow the heat loss while everything else I'd done worked on the underlying problems.

I sat back on my heels and looked at him.

The diagnostic strip was still spitting out data every few seconds.

The numbers hadn't improved dramatically—that wasn't how any of this worked, as much as video-games had taught me otherwise—but the trajectory had flattened out from the steep deterioration it had been showing when I'd first slapped it on.

The artery wasn't feeding the bleed anymore. The trauma patch was doing its job and somewhat stabilizing both the internal bleeds and the pneumothoracic issues.

His breathing was still shallow and careful, but it was at least slightly more regular.

I brushed my exposed skin against his, bracing for impact.

[Vital Sense Report]
Vitals: Stable.
Main Injury: Slicing-wound, Left Arm, Stark Severity—Brachial artery, haemorrhage stopped.

I breathed out a quiet sigh of relief, but felt none of the tension leave my body.

‘Stable always sounded so comforting before [First-Aid]’s knowledge download…’ I couldn’t help but think. ‘Stable sounded like people would be alright, but all it means is that they aren’t actively getting far worse…’

He was now officially fragile-stable, held-together-with-skill-downloads-and-spray-bandage stable, needs-a-Ripper-in-the-next-hour stable—but *stable* nevertheless.

Somewhere behind me, the conversation in Japanese had continued in urgent, overlapping fragments, until Higgins had pushed himself off the wall and moved deeper into the building with the slow, controlled gait of someone rationing how much each step was allowed to cost.

That left three of us in the foyer—Reina, Kaito, and me, with Takeda unconscious on the floor between us and whatever the Scravwrights were planning on the other side of the door as the fourth variable in the room.

"Gig's through." Reina broke the silence without preamble, her voice carrying the particular flatness of someone delivering information rather than commentary. "Two hits already. Don't know either team, but ETA for the earliest is around fifteen minutes."

It was, genuinely, the first piece of unambiguously good news in the last twenty minutes, and I felt the small, *real* relief of it land somewhere in my chest.

Reina was looking at me as she added. "How long does Takeda-san have?"

I sat with the question for a moment, running what I actually knew against what I was being asked to estimate, and then gave her the most honest answer I had—a shrug, and a hand tilted side to side in the universal gesture for "*I have no fucking clue*".

"No idea," I said, more diplomatically. "He's stable right now, but stable with this much going wrong at once isn't the same as fine. I can't give you a number with any confidence, but—if I had to put something on it—anything past thirty minutes and I'd start worrying *seriously*. Past that and he's either dead or going to wish he was."

I heard myself say it and caught the register immediately—too flat, too clinical, the empathy somewhere several layers underneath the analysis and not making it to the surface.

The internal flinch that followed was very real.

I exhaled, scrubbing a hand across my forehead briefly.

"Sorry. What I mean is—" I shifted, trying to find the version of this that was accurate and also somewhat human rather than the iced over version that Edge had presented just now. "It's the concussion I can't touch. Whatever's happening inside his skull—if there's bleeding around the brain, or inside it, which given how he went down is pretty likely—that's what's keeping him under. If it's an epidural hemorrhage, we might already be too late… But either way, every minute that pressure sits there—whatever it is—the odds of permanent damage go up drastically. The kind that even PremMed can't walk back."

I glanced down at him briefly, then back up. "I can't look into his head to figure out how bad it is without making it worse. So I *genuinely* don't have a timeline. I just know it's not a long one."

Reina absorbed the information with a slow blink and a small, tight nod.

Kaito said nothing for a moment, then made a short sound that carried more weight than most people managed with full sentences.

"You did good," Reina said quietly.

"Yeah," Kaito added, already shifting some debris with his cybernetic arm. "Appreciate the efforts, Ela-san. You're doing more than we had hoped for, really."

I hadn't expected either of those.

I opened my mouth, found I didn't have an immediate response that wasn't awkward, and closed it again. Then finally settled for a stoic nod and kept moving, crossing the foyer toward Kaito to get a look at his gunshot wounds while the moment was still available—

The door took a *hit* that sent a shockwave through the entire frame.

The sound was enormous in the confined space—a dense, percussive crash that bounced off every hard surface in the foyer and came back doubled, the kind of impact that suggested something *significantly* heavier than a shoulder had been applied to the other side.

The makeshift barricade shuddered but thankfully held, the door jumping in its wedge and settling back into place with a grinding scrape.

Kaito was already moving, grabbing the nearest piece of available debris and adding it to the pile with the focused economy of someone who'd immediately and correctly updated their priorities.

I threw one look at Reina, who was already reading the question on my face.

She hesitated.

A full second of it—genuine, visible reluctance, the expression of someone being asked to hand over something they had strong feelings about.

Then she sighed—a short and resigned one—and held out the pistol she could no longer reliably aim with her right arm wrecked the way it was. Two spare mags came with it, pressed into my palm with the particular care of someone who wanted it noted that this was a significant gesture of trust.

"*Don't* lose it," she said, and the tone made clear this was not a throwaway comment.

I met her eyes and nodded once.

I tucked the mags into my jacket pocket and turned back to the door.

I got my shoulder next to Kaito's and started adding weight to the barricade, feeding anything the foyer had left to offer into the pile—a section of shelving, a waterlogged cardboard box that probably wouldn't stop anything but contributed to the structural mass, a chunk of what had once been a decorative partition and was now just a useful rectangle of non-descript material.

The second hit came even harder than the first.

The whole fortification lurched inward an inch before the combined weight pushed back, the sound compressing the air in the foyer into something that bypassed the ears entirely and went straight into the chest cavity.

My ears resumed their earlier complaints, the high whine reinstating itself with enthusiasm…