



NEO

NEON BAYLON NIGHTS

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"Financial stress creates ideal conditions for subject recruitment and retention." — Corporate Healthcare Partnerships Integration Manual

Chapter 1: Stage Lights

The timer in Mika's HUD stepped forward at 06:00 and nudged the ledger red. € 18,944 → 18,996. Hourly interest posted. Health-tier surcharge applied. The number advanced with clean, bureaucratic confidence, you could almost hear it ratchet into place. Her morning routine held no surprises: hot water to ease joint stiffness; elastic binding around bruised ribs; a med-patch pressed to her lower spine; bitter pills that made her tongue numb; a heated compress on swollen wrists while coffee brewed. She twisted her hair into a practical knot and tested walking. All systems functional...ish.

Her unit held three by four meters, the third stack from the corner, two blocks from Neon Babylon, courtesy of her "Exclusive Entertainment contract".

Exclusive contracts read like employment, but function like debt slavery. The paperwork begins with benefits, housing credit, medical monitoring, and security

coverage. The clauses that matter sit buried. Breach penalties. Exclusivity lockouts. Hourly interest. Automatic lien transfer to the Hyperion Ledger.

The performer's body becomes collateral. Biometric identifiers—retina code, cortical tags, implant serials—registered as assets of Tachibana Holdings and leased to a venue. The clause that states “in the event of incapacity, asset management transfers to designated partners” sounds clinical. In practice, it authorizes repossession...of a human being.

Debt often compounds faster than earnings. A late shift, a missed appearance, refusal to join a “wellness program”—each violation converts into ledger entries that can triple the balance. Buyout is theoretical; the formula pegs cost to projected future income. Certainly, no dancer has cleared it.

Medical monitoring is sold as care. In reality, it provides a continuous stream of health data to partner firms. The flagged entries, chronic pain, organ compatibility, and neurochemical instability become recruitment leads. Employees cannot refuse recommended treatment without defaulting. Default escalates debt. Debt triggers repossession.

The cycle closes in silence. One week, a dancer performs three sets a night. Next, she accepts “company assistance” for her condition. Her contract terminates with a digital entry marked TRANSFERRED. There will be no public record of the destination. Only the certainty that her debt is settled, her contract fulfilled, and her body reassigned. It's the only way out. If you breach the contract by dying, the debt is passed on with funeral expenses and interest to your nearest surviving relative. Mika didn't have any of those, but she was damn sure Hyperion would dig one up.

Her elevator wheezed, shuddered, and gave up; the stairs it is. The hallway smelled like a drunk, and the stairs nurtured mystery puddles she didn't want to think

about too hard. She counted steps down the stairs so her breath settled into a steady cadence before she hit what was street level to her. It was forty-three steps to street level. Forty-three opportunities to turn around, call in sick, let the debt compound for one more day. But sick days cost more than working days, and if she didn't work, she was fucked.

Neo Kyoto sprawled over multiple layers. The rich at the top, the poor at the bottom.

The rich lived at the skyline, in towers with private transit and sealed gardens. The middle tiers floated on mezzanines; commerce stacked over entertainment. Below that came the Drift, the broken grid of old infrastructure where the city's weight pressed down. The Burrows a shanty town of collapsed stations and slum housing held together by street gangs and black-market clinics. And the Stacks.

In the stacks sat the Ghost Market, which traded memories, identities, and debt ledgers from repurposed containers. Street level meant different things depending on where you stood. For Mika, it was a concrete corridor that connected Babylon's staff entrance to the night.

By the time she reached Babylon's service entrance, the timer in her HUD had clicked forward another increment. $\text{C } 18,996 \rightarrow 19,001$. The night shift would have to earn that back and then some. She clocked in on the service entrance slab; her thumbprint pinged green. The back corridor hummed with refrigeration and closed-loop air. The early shift staff moved with practiced economy—barbacks cased bottles, stage techs ran a light check, housekeeping wiped a stupid spill with industrial speed. No celebrities. No chaos. Controlled.

Rin stood in Security Hub with a headset parked on her collarbone, optics green in the dim. She scanned four feeds, nudged a camera two degrees with a smooth thumb press, and clocked Mika with a short nod.

Rin commanded space despite her modest stature, a human fortress compressed into five foot six of attitude and determination. Decades of labour had carved her into something between a prize-fighter and an ironworker. She carried the comfortable weight of someone who'd never counted calories, only lifted them. Her legs could have belonged to a dock worker or a dancer, thick with power. Her chrome arms were crude corporate replacements, warehouse loader hardware bolted into her frame where flesh had been burned away.

Chrome polish with visible joint seams at the shoulders, they moved with mechanical precision but lacked the fluid grace of military-grade prosthetics. Scars radiated outward from the fusion points like lightning frozen in flesh. Her short black hair was cropped in a practical bob that wouldn't get in her way during a fight. Green cybernetic optic implants glowed faintly in the hub's dim light, casting pinprick emerald reflections on the console displays.

"You're on the twenty-one and twenty-three," Rin said. "Crowd profile skewed corporate. Two mezz booths reserved. We keep the buffer tight. Pulse?"

"Eighty," Mika said.

Rin's eyes flicked, did the math. "Keep it under ninety on spins. Patch life?"

"Six hours," Mika said. "Change after the second set."

"Good," Rin said. "If you need five minutes, you take five. Call it. No fucking arguments."

"Yes Rin," Mika intoned

Backstage, Mika set out her kit in order: stage suit, fishnets, heel anchors, spare tape, wipes, secondary patch, antiseptic, and two sealed ampoules of electrolytes.

She watched her hands in the mirror for tremors. They held steady for now.

A pay stub sat folded in her locker where pay stubs never sat. White stock. Clean printing. WELLNESS PARTNER — STAFF HEALTH INITIATIVE in polite text. There was a tasteful logo, an abstract circle with three radiating lines. A QR key in one corner and a number stamped with real ink. No company name visible. No return address.

She slid it behind the elastic strap inside the locker and logged it as an anomaly, nothing she needed to worry about.

The club came up to temperature in the first set. She marked the space with her body. It was a hard sell at this time, early evening, but she worked the stage and was scooping up some tips. The pain sat at a four, then grazed five with the long hold; the patch did its job. She counted the beats, executed the plan, and stepped off on schedule. The number in her HUD climbed cleanly but never outran the red.

The second set anchored the night. The crowd started to pack out the club. The two mezz booths were filled with Corp suits in the dark Tachibana uniform of black suit, white shirt, dark tie. They were drinking heavily, all snapping hands and disdain. Compliance types. They drank at consistent intervals. They did not sweat.

Backstage, Mika swapped shoes to flats and walked the small square of floor to clear lactate, checked her pulse, then sat to replace the patch with practiced care. The QR card in the locker lay where she left it. She turned it over once.

Rin appeared in the doorway. "Pain?"

"Four," Mika said.

Rin's gaze ran over the fresh tape, the posture, the breath rate. "Keep your fucking rhythm. Watch mezz. Same two losers from the brief."

Mika tilted the card so Rin could see. "I got a new thing, Rin."

Rin held out a chromed hand. Mika placed it on Rin's palm. Rin scanned the code with a private slab, eyebrows barely moving as plaintext populated.

"Just a landing page. No corporate headers. Call centre hours listed. A form that pretends not to be a form. They want your full name and date of birth to 'confirm eligibility.'"

"What if it's Hyperion Wellness?" Mika said.

"Do nothing," Rin said. "If they're legit, they try again. If they're hunting, they try again, we trap them and fuck them up."

Mika nodded, slid the card under the strap again, and returned to the floor. She finished the night on schedule and handed off to Kaeda the headline act, no missed holds, no dropped smiles. The ledger in her HUD kept perfect time with the compressor hum in the ceiling.

Back in the dressing room, she iced her ribs and checked the card one more time. The logo's thin lines felt smug.

She went home through rain, fuzz and sodium lights. She slept with the patch timer set and her comm face down.

The next afternoon, a message pinged while she tightened the heel anchors.

We support staff health. Complimentary assessment available near you. Reply Y to schedule.

New number. Same logo. Same non-name.

She stared at the screen until the cursor's blink felt like a pulse intruding. Then she typed Y and set the phone face down again.

She entered her shift twelve minutes early. She warmed up until the pain started to ease a little

The night paid. The red remained.

Chapter 2: Medical Opportunity

The assessment took place in a rented suite in a glass building two stops from the club. The directory listed twenty innocuous companies. The plaque for this one read *Medical Research Partners* in some anodyne font. The lobby smelled like compliance.

A woman in a neutral grey suit tapped a button that opened the glass door to Mika, tablet in hand. "You must be Mika." It wasn't a question. "Thanks for coming in," she said. "I'm Aiko."

Mika logged the handshake pressure, the eye contact, and the suit. Everything landed in the middle of a bell curve. Nothing stuck.

"The Assessment will take about thirty minutes," Aiko said. "It's nothing to be concerned about. We collect baseline metrics, review history, and discuss options. There is zero obligation."

"How did you select me?" Mika asked.

"Community screening," Aiko said smoothly. "We partner with local providers to identify candidates who benefit."

"Which providers?" Mika said.

Aiko's smile held. "All approved Hyperion partners."

They moved through a short, sterile corridor into a room with a couch, a monitor, two chairs, and a small medical cart. A technician in grey ran a wall unit the

size of a briefcase; its screen showed a fat cursor and a thin line—the real work hidden under the casing.

Aiko sat and placed the tablet flat on the table so Mika could see the screen. Mika's legal name loaded without keystrokes. Her date of birth followed. A masked copy of her clinic number appeared next, with four digits revealed like a magic trick. Aiko turned the tablet back toward herself before the rest of the file populated.

"We look at persistent pain syndromes that resist standard interventions," Aiko said. "Your case matches several models. You've done everything right. You work. You adhere to treatment. You still hurt. We can help." She smiled.

"What do you mean by help?" Mika said.

"Targeted cortical modulation," Aiko said. "We map, calibrate, and deliver low-amplitude stimulation to restore your body's normal signalling capabilities. Twelve sessions. Non-invasive. Outpatient. We also address the financial burden associated with your condition."

"Address how," Mika said.

"Debt forgiveness upon completion," Aiko said. "We settle medical balances tied to the diagnosed condition."

"From your budget?" Mika said.

"Through our partners," Aiko said. "Fully structured. You complete the treatment; your balance zeroes, inclusive of interest."

"Which partners?" Mika said.

Aiko's smile didn't slip. "Authorized funding pools, Mika. We can disclose them at the contract stage. But it remains confidential until you sign, I'm sure you understand. "

While they spoke, medical staff bustled around Mika. A nurse measured her blood pressure with a cuff that sealed itself. A technician placed warm pads at her temples and took a two-minute trace; the machine hummed at the threshold of hearing. Aiko marked results on the tablet with small, neat taps.

"Work schedule?" Aiko said.

"Nights," Mika said.

"We can accommodate nights," Aiko said. "We can provide sessions scheduled around your shifts. We can even arrange transport if required."

"Do you know where I work?" Mika said pointedly.

"We schedule around nights," Aiko repeated, as if the words could occupy the space an answer should fill.

"Are there side effects?" Mika said.

"Transient headaches in some participants," Aiko said. "Short-term fatigue. We monitor the dose. We adjust; we resolve."

"Outcomes?" Mika said.

"Extremely promising," Aiko said. "Our early cohorts report significant pain reduction by session six."

"Numbers," Mika said.

"Confidential until publication," Aiko said. "We can share aggregate summaries upon consent."

She pushed a clean folder across the table. Inside: a tri-fold brochure with diagrams; a one-page summary that used words like precision and care, and a packet with the legend *Participant Information* written in crisp type.

"Take these," Aiko said. "No pressure. If you choose to proceed, reply to the message you received. We schedule Session 0: Orientation and begin. We cover transport. We provide stipends during treatment."

"Why stipends?" Mika said.

"Because participants often reduce work hours during the first week," Aiko said. "We ensure stability."

The nurse returned with a slim credit wafer, corporate logo etched in silver.

"What's this?" Mika said.

"Assessment payment," Aiko said. "Your time has value, does it not?"

Mika slid the wafer into her bag and logged it as unusual income.

On the tram back, she pulled out the brochure, which unfolded into three panels, heavy stock with a gloss finish. On the front: the same abstract circle logo she'd seen on the locker card, three clean lines radiating outward. Beneath it: **Wellness Integration / Staff Health Initiative** in bland corporate font.

Inside: pastel diagrams of a brain rendered in smooth, rounded geometry. Labels like *pain axis*, *signal correction*, and *calibration*. Stock photos of smiling people in clinic gowns.

A footnote at the bottom of the third panel directed patients to *authorized funding partners* for "balance adjustments."

On the back panel: a single phrase in bold text. **Zero Balance Upon Completion.**

Mika reached up and pinched the bridge of her nose until the tension bled from her eye sockets. The ledger in her HUD advanced again at the hour.

Rin stood at the security hub when Mika arrived for her shift. Chrome fingers tapped against the console as feeds pulsed across her screens.

"How'd it go?" Rin said without looking up.

"Professional," Mika said. "Clean."

"Sounds shit."

Mika changed patches in the prep room and lined up her kit. Stage suit. Shoes, Tape. The routine felt normal until she thought about the envelope in her bag. Two hundred credits for sitting in a chair. Three times what she made per set.

"They knew my clinic number," she said when Rin appeared in the doorway.

"Course they did." Rin's optics dimmed. "Question is how."

"Data breach?"

"Nah, they don't need to hack it, when they can buy it." Rin's voice carried the flat tone she usually used for bad news. "Medical privacy's a luxury now. Hyperion sells debt profiles to collection agencies. Collection agencies sell them to anyone."

"To research companies?"

"To literally fucking anyone with enough credits."

Mika felt the first set warming her muscles, the audience settling into attention. She moved through the routine and felt the number in her HUD climb. Not enough. Never enough.

After the second set, she found Rin in the security hub, surrounded by monitor glow.

"If I did it," Mika said, "would you watch for flags?"

Rin's hands stopped moving. "What kind of flags?"

"The kind that say I disappeared."

Rin turned in her chair. Chrome fingers drummed once against her thigh.

"Fuck Mika, you're seriously considering this."

"Debt forgiveness," Mika said. "Complete. They showed me the contract structure."

"And you believe them?"

"I believe the debt's real. I believe the pain's real. Everything else is risk assessment."

Rin stared at her for ten seconds. "If you do this, be careful, you make sure you tell me before you go in, give me details."

"Deal."

Rin nodded once. "Then yes. I watch for flags."

Chapter 3: Too Good to Be True

The second call came three days later. Same number, same professional tone.

"Congratulations Mika. We've processed your assessment," Aiko said. "You qualify for immediate enrolment. Can you visit us tomorrow?"

"For what?"

"Intake and consent. One hour. We begin treatment the following week."

Mika agreed and ended the call. The eagerness bothered her. She'd worked enough corporate contracts to know when the sale came too easily.

The next morning, her HUD showed the daily advancement: ¢ 19,847 → 19,921. Health-tier surcharge. Late payment fee. Administrative overhead. The line items populated like clockwork.

At the Medical Research Partners suite, Aiko waited with the tablet and a thicker folder.

"Excellent news," Aiko said. "Your cognitive markers indicate high treatment compatibility. We can begin immediately."

She slid the folder across the table. The consent forms ran to eighteen pages. Mika scanned the headers: Treatment Protocol Overview, Confidentiality Agreement, Financial Arrangements, Emergency Contact Information.

"The financial section," Mika said.

"Page eleven."

Mika flipped to the page and found a table with two columns: Current Medical Debt and Covered Amount. The numbers matched exactly. € 19,921 in the left column. € 19,921 in the right column.

"How do you know the exact amount?"

"We partner with multiple debt management firms," Aiko said.

"Cross-referencing ensures complete coverage."

"Which firms?"

"All of the Mika. The authorization is on page fourteen."

Mika flipped ahead. The section header read Debt Management Authorization. Below it, a single line: Hyperion Ledger Subsidiary Services, LLC.

"You work with Hyperion directly?"

"Through their research partnership division," Aiko said. "All properly structured."

Mika felt something cold settle in her stomach. "They referred me to you."

"Not exactly. We identify candidates through multiple screening pathways. Some involve partner organizations."

"But Hyperion provided my debt information."

"For verification purposes only."

The words carried the careful weight of legal scripting. Mika flipped back to the treatment protocol section and found diagrams of electrode placement, waveform patterns, and session duration tables. Everything looked medical. Everything looked safe.

"The treatment facility," she said. "Where?"

"Industrial district. Former biotech complex. We've retrofitted it for clinical use."

"Address?"

"Provided at consent confirmation."

Mika closed the folder. "I need time to review everything."

"Of course, Mika. Take the folder. We can hold your enrollment slot for forty-eight hours."

On the tram back, Mika read every page twice. The language was dense, clinical, and precise. Everything she expected from legitimate medical research. Everything about it made her skin crawl.

Back at Babylon, she found Rin reviewing the clubs security protocols.

"They know my exact debt," Mika said. "Down to the credit."

"Obviously, they do, Mika. They're buying it."

"What does that mean?"

"Means Hyperion sold your contract to this fucking research company. Probably at a fucking discount. They get their fucking money, the fucking research company gets you, and your fucking debt becomes their fucking debt."

"That's legal?"

"Fuck yes. Debtor transfer agreements. Standard fucking practice."

Mika sat on the bench and let the information settle. "So if I complete treatment, they write off their own asset."

"Yeah. Except now they own your contract, not Hyperion. Different rules."

"What kind of rules?"

"The kind they write themselves."

"Ok Rin, I'll stay, I'll call them in the morning, ok?, happy?"

"Fucking ecstatic," grizzled Rin

That night, Mika worked two sets and watched the audience. Corporate faces in the mezz booths. Compliance types drinking at measured intervals. The same faces she'd seen for months. Same faces she would see for months, maybe years

Chapter 4: The Contract

But the deadline sat in Mika's HUD like a countdown timer. Twenty-three hours. Twenty-two. The ledger climbed with each refresh. € 20,156 → 20,189. Interest compounding faster than her earning rate. She knew Rin would lose her shot if she didn't turn up. But the image of the suits staring indifferently at her while she stripped for them was burned on her retina. Maybe she would just go down and check it out. She could call in sick. One day wouldn't hurt.

"The enrollment confirmation took place at the Medical Research Partners suite at 14:00. Aiko waited with the tablet and a pen that cost more than Mika's monthly rent.

"Excellent," Aiko said. "We're delighted to welcome you to the program."

The signature process was ceremonial. Electronic confirmation, biometric verification, data transmission. The pen never touched paper, but Aiko insisted on the gesture.

"Transport arranges pickup from your residence," Aiko said. "Monday, 08:00. Bring personal items for a two-week stay. Treatment requires observation."

"Two weeks?"

"Standard monitoring period. Some participants experience adjustment symptoms. We prefer on-site care."

"The consent forms specified outpatient."

"With optional residential observation. All covered."

The revision felt scripted, rehearsed. Mika signed anyway.

"Financial verification requires two business days," Aiko said. "Your debt obligation transfers to our management during that period. No further accrual."

"The pain management?"

"Begins immediately. We'll provide interim medications pending treatment initiation."

The nurse appeared with a small bottle. Twelve pills, each scored with a corporate logo. No label. No instructions.

"One every eight hours," the nurse said. "They integrate with your current medications."

"What are they?"

"Proprietary compound. Neural pathway modulators. They prepare your system for treatment."

Mika pocketed the bottle. The pills rattled like dice.

Outside, the city felt different. Cleaner. More organized. The ledger in her HUD stopped climbing. For the first time in three years, the debt was frozen.

Her last shift at Babylon ran smooth. Two sets, standard crowd, no complications. She moved through the routine and felt the familiar ache in her ribs, but muted now, cushioned by the pills from the bottle.

"You're sure about this?" Rin said during the changeover.

"Sure enough."

"Check-in protocol starts Monday morning. Same time every day."

"Understood."

"And Mika? Remember, this was your choice. That matters."

The words carried weight beyond their meaning. Choice was the last luxury left in a corporate city. The freedom to select your own cage. To pick the contract that consumed you.

"I'll remember," Mika said.

She finished the shift, collected her pay, and cleaned out her locker. The QR card sat behind the elastic strap where she'd left it. She crumpled it and dropped it in the disposal chute.

Monday morning, 07:58. The transport arrived on schedule: a white van with medical plates and tinted windows. The driver wore hospital scrubs and spoke in professional courtesy. The seat was comfortable. The route was direct.

The facility sat behind chain-link and concrete barriers in the industrial district. A former biotech complex, just as Aiko had described. Clean lines. Functional architecture. A sign by the gate read Wellness Integration Research Campus in corporate font.

Inside, the corridors smelled of antiseptic and new plastic. Staff moved with clinical efficiency. Everything was white. Everything was clean. Everything felt like the beginning of something irreversible.

They assigned her a room with a bed with a number: 23, a chair, and a window that looked out on the research complex. Twenty-three other studies. Twenty-three other sets of people who had chosen to be consumed.

At 09:00, a technician came to collect her for orientation. The session room held a chair, a monitor, and a machine the size of a briefcase. The same setup from the assessment, but larger. More complex. More final.

"Please be seated," the technician said. "We'll begin with baseline measurements. Please can you sign this waiver?"

He passed her a pad to place her thumb. It bore the legend "*PROJECT NEON VEIL*"

Mika sat in the chair and felt the leather conform to her body. Electrodes attached to her temples with surgical precision. The machine hummed at the threshold of hearing. On the monitor, waveforms bloomed like digital flowers.

"Are you ready to begin?" the technician asked.

Mika thought about the debt, the pain, the choice. She thought about Rin watching for signals. She thought about the facility and the research and the variables that got better and the variables that didn't.

"Yes," she said. "I'm ready."

The machine hummed louder. The waveforms pulsed. The treatment began.

But no debt was ever paid.

End of Book

