

Chapter 151 - Choice

I wasn't sure what I was more surprised about: The fact that all those words had just tumbled out of my mouth that I hadn't even known needed to be said, or the fact that Valeria seemed to be genuinely listening and taking in what I was saying—visibly *reacting* to it.

A frown had spread on her face, not one of indignation or anger, as had been the case with Nyxstalker's goading on her, but rather one of seemingly genuine consternation.

I, on the other hand, just felt... raw.

Like the words had ignited somewhere deep in my chest and burned their way out before I could stop them. They hadn't come from logic or control—they'd just erupted, all at once, from a place that didn't feel entirely physical somewhere that couldn't properly be located.

Guilt came rushing in to fill the silence that followed.

*'It's really not okay for me to ask her to be more motherly,' I thought, biting the inside of my cheek. 'She's literally **not** my mother. And here I am, yelling at her for not giving me the right kind of love that was never mine to begin with.'*

And the longer I thought about it, the worse it felt.

'It's bad enough that I've hijacked Sera's life... now I'm out here demanding affection from her family like I've earned it? What the hell is wrong with me?'

I *should've* been furious at her.

If I looked at it logically, Valeria was the reason all of yesterday had happened.

The fear, the pain, the blood. The invasion of our home. The renewed NeuroCorpse torture. The horror of Gabriel screaming as his arms were severed.

All of it.

It was *her* failure to protect us that had caused all of it.

And even before that—she'd already crossed lines no parent should ever cross.

She'd fed us *NeuroCorpse*, for fuck's sake. Used her own children as tools.

No apology or guilt could ever erase that.

None of that was okay. None of that should ever be forgiven.

So why... Why had I said all of that? Why was I so desperate to please and belong to her?

*'Do I really crave a family that much?' The thought made my chest tighten. 'Am I so desperate to feel like I belong **somewhere** that I'll take it from anyone? Even from someone like her?'*

My Intuition told me that, no—it wasn't that simple. But it didn't offer me anything better, either. Just left me drowning in the noise of conflicting thoughts and half-felt emotions that didn't really seem to belong anywhere.

Valeria, at least, didn't let the quiet stretch too long.

She drew in a long breath—one of those tired, bone-deep sighs that sound like someone giving up a little part of themselves—and slumped forward, her composure momentarily cracking. Her left hand raked through her sleek black hair, mussing it slightly before she forced herself upright again.

When she spoke, her voice was softer than I'd ever heard it. Still precise, still *Valeria*, but stripped of its usual cold polish.

"I see," she said quietly.

A few seconds of stillness passed before Valeria's lips curved into a small, almost peaceful smile—one that didn't make sense, not here, not now. It didn't belong on her face, but it suited her in a way that made my chest tighten all the same.

"You really have grown a lot, little Sera," she said softly, and the way she said it made a chill crawl down my spine. "You must think me a monster, do you not? A mother too blinded by her own selfish need for redemption to properly care for her child's pain."

The words hung there, quiet but somehow sharp but not aimed at me, like a confession she'd rehearsed a hundred times inside her own head before finally saying out loud.

She took another deep breath, eyes growing distant. "Ever since you woke up from that coma, I knew something fundamental had changed. The first time I came home and you looked me straight in the eyes and said '*Mother*' with that cold tone—so detached, so distant—it... broke something in me."

She laughed weakly, but it wasn't joy. "I had the reports from the hospital about the chances for your recovery verified three separate times by the best people EtherLabs could hire, and still... I hoped. Foolishly, selfishly, I hoped that I would get another chance."

Her left hand went up to her hair again, fingers tangling through the ebony strands until she was gripping it tightly, like she needed the pain to keep herself grounded.

"And you were so strong," she murmured, almost to herself. "So very, very strong."

When her gaze returned to me, it was clear, steady, and heartbreakingly human.

"I leaned on you, Sera. Because you were stronger than me."

A bitter chuckle escaped her.

"Still are, evidently. I cannot even protect my family, and yet I have the audacity to ask you for absolution? No wonder you would call me a monster. It is exactly what I am..."

She reached for one of the datapads spread across the table, fingers swiping and typing with mechanical precision even as her tone drifted into something strangely casual—too casual for somebody like her.

“I really thought I knew better,” she continued, her voice growing quieter as she stared at the screen. “Thought I could manage everything without having to sacrifice anything. Thought I could outmaneuver consequences. Get away with it all... But here we are.”

She didn’t look at me as she spoke next.

“You want to know what my worst flaw is, Sera?” she asked, shaking her head slightly, a tired, bitter smile pulling at her lips. “It’s that I still think I was right. That I *am* right. Even after everything. I still believe I made the best possible choices with the information I had at the time. Every single decision—I can’t see myself doing anything differently, even if I had the chance to go back. I’d do everything exactly the same, landing both of us right here, once more.”

My chest tightened, anger flaring up before I could stop it. I didn’t even have time to think.

The words just exploded out of me.

“You’d still torture Gabriel and me for no reason, then?” My voice cracked, too loud, too raw.

“You *fed us NeuroCorpse*, Valeria! You poisoned your own children—for *what*? Because I asked for help from a person I couldn’t possibly know anything about? Because Gabriel almost *died* and it made you look bad? And you’re still standing there saying you wouldn’t do anything differently, even after realising what you have done? What the fuck is wrong with you?! You’re not just a monster, you’re a fucking psychopath!”

My voice echoed through the empty apartment, bouncing off the walls and back into my ears like a gunshot I couldn’t take back.

And then the silence hit.

The anger drained out of me just as fast as it had flared up, replaced by cold, creeping dread. I realized what I’d just done—what I’d said.

I’d cursed at her. Screamed in her face. Called her a psychopath.

Valeria didn’t move. Didn’t even blink.

Her eyes were locked on me—steady, unflinching, unreadable.

And yet, something primal inside me recoiled, my body instinctively wanting to shrink back, to disappear under that gaze.

Even without the usual sharpness—the clipped tone, the flawless posture, the steel in her every word—she still scared the hell out of me. Because no matter how raw or broken she looked right now, she was still *Valeria Vildea*.

The silence stretched between us like a blade balanced on edge.

Every passing second dragged longer than it had any right to, until it felt like whole minutes were slipping by between heartbeats. The air itself seemed to thicken with tension, coiling in my gut until it was hard to breathe.

I almost flipped my Ego on—*almost*.

It would've been so easy to hide behind the calm that came with it, to bury everything messy and human under layers of focus and control.

But it didn't feel right. Not this time.

This wasn't a fight I could win with logic or calculation.

This wasn't about efficiency—it was about emotion, pure and unfiltered.

The uncertainty of what she'd do next—the way she just *looked* at me without saying a word—was enough to make my stomach twist, bile creeping up my throat.

I'd never felt fear like this. Not the kind that came from danger, but from confrontation—from not knowing whether I'd just crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed.

Still, I didn't look away. Couldn't.

'I need to get through this,' I told myself, gripping the edges of the chair to try and steady myself. *'It was always going to come to this at some point. Might as well be now.'*

"Yes," Valeria said simply with no remorse evident in her voice.

Just that one, sharp word cutting through the silence like a scalpel.

My heart sank. I thought that maybe, *maybe* she'd say something more—an explanation, a justification, anything to soften it. But she didn't.

Not right away, anyway.

Then, after what felt like a full minute, she added, "I would have done it all again. *Especially* the NeuroCorpse."

The admission hit me like a slap. I actually flinched.

Before I could say anything, she lifted a finger—graceful, deliberate—signaling me to stay quiet and listen. Her tone stayed measured, the kind of calm that came from someone who had already dissected every moral angle and filed them neatly away.

"Administering Gabriel and you the NeuroCorpse was not solely an instructional exercise," she said evenly. "It was, admittedly, used as such at the time, but that was not the initial purpose. It was something that *needed* to happen—inevitably. Gabriel required a reason to take life more seriously, and you..."

Her eyes softened slightly, though the edge never left her voice. “You needed a reminder. People are not kind, Sera. You used to know this. You forgot.”

Her words hung heavy in the air, each one placed like a deliberate weight.

“The encounter with Mr. Shori, however beneficial it ended up being in the long run, had dulled your instincts. You began to believe that idealism and kindness was anything but an extreme rarity in this world, and that,” she said, leaning back slightly, “was dangerous. Unacceptable. So I acted. Whether or not either of you had done anything wrong was irrelevant—the intervention was necessary. Logical. The fact that both of you just happened to need reminders at the same time, was but a happy coincidence.”

She paused, and then, almost unbelievably, a small, proud smile flickered across her face.

“And I was right. Even in hindsight, it was the correct decision. It prepared you, specifically, Sera. Had you not built resistance from that night, yesterday would have gone quite differently, I would imagine.”

I blinked, confused. “*Resistance?*”

Valeria gave a slow nod. “NeuroCorpse leaves behind a decaying tolerance within the nervous system—a form of adaptive resistance. It fades after approximately a month. By exposing you both in a controlled setting, I ensured that if either of you were ever captured, you’d survive the administration of large doses and long enough for me to find you. Most corporations still make heavy use of NeuroCorpse during interrogations that are time-sensitive, after all. It’s quick, it’s efficient, and it’s absolute. I simply ensured that, should that situation ever arise, it would not be the end.”

Her logic was airtight. Clean. Cold.

But beneath the precision, her words made my stomach twist.

She’d *planned* that dinner. Not as a punishment. Not as a lesson. But as a preemptive countermeasure—because she’d expected us to be tortured someday.

And the absolute worst part was that I knew she was right. Every damn word of it.

‘That explains everything...’

The thought hit me hard, sitting like lead in the pit of my stomach.

I’d wondered about it even as it was happening—why the NeuroCorpse they’d pumped into me had felt so much weaker than Valeria’s dose back at the dinner. Nyxstalker’s men had used a much larger dose, and yet... it hadn’t hit me the same way. *Not even close*. The food buff still circulating in my bloodstream wasn’t enough to make up *that* kind of difference.

No—this had been it. The reason.

That earlier exposure had numbed my system, trained my nerves to endure just long enough to survive.

Even with the few points of Ego I'd gained since that dinner, there was no way I should've lasted a full minute under NeuroCorpse's grip.

Not without that resistance Valeria had forced on me. Not without her interference.

I swallowed hard, staring at the table.

"You should've just told us," I said quietly. The words came out softer than I intended, more weary than accusatory—for I knew that they didn't hold up under scrutiny, before I even said them.

Valeria didn't hesitate. "And make the both of you worry about something you could neither prevent nor prepare for?" Her tone carried that familiar, cool rhythm again—polished, automatic—but underneath it, there was something lighter, almost teasing. "Sera, my sweet girl... you're smarter than that."

I flinched at the sound of it. The gentle reprimand. The strange warmth behind it.

Because she *was* right.

Even if she'd told me, what would that have changed? I would've spent every waking moment on edge, watching every shadow, every sound in the hall. Gabriel would've been *worse*—he had already jumped at the idea of getting snatched by Scavs every time he left the apartment. Telling him that actual corporate operatives might come for him too? That he'd be tortured just because of who he was? That would've utterly broken him.

No. As twisted as it was, she'd made the only logical call.

And that realization—that I understood her reasoning, that I *agreed* with it—made me feel sick all over again.

"But I understand where you're coming from, Sera," Valeria said suddenly, pulling my attention back to her face. I hadn't expected her to keep talking after that blow-out. "I have not made my actions transparent—nor am I obligated to, mind you—but that does not change the fact that I failed in my duties yesterday."

Before I could respond, she flipped the datapad in her hand and slid it across the table.

The device skidded to a stop right in front of me with a soft clack.

"I will give you a choice now," she said. "One I did not consider you ready for before. You've proven yourself far more capable than I anticipated—capable enough to no longer *require* my permanent oversight."

I glanced down at the datapad, hesitating before picking it up.

Three sections glowed on the screen, each framed in a soft amber outline.

My eyes flicked between them, scanning the labels.

Then I looked back up at Valeria, and my heart skipped at the implications.

"You may continue living with us—Gabriel, Oliver, and myself—if that is your decision," she explained, her tone returning to that careful, almost clinical calm. "But I will not compel you to. You have earned the right to decide your next steps."

She leaned back slightly, her left hand gesturing toward the screen. "I can arrange any of these options. The first is an apartment here in Delta, on the same floor as the rest of the family. The second, an independent unit in one of Neo Avalis's middle districts—away from corporate interference, or about as away as you can get, at least. The final option is Fenwylde Academy, alongside Gabriel, once he has recovered. You would live there for the duration of your studies."

Her hand rose again, raking through her dark hair until the faint sound of strands catching and tearing echoed in the silence. It wasn't the deliberate gesture of a composed executive—it was messy.

"If you want your own life, make your own decisions, make your own mistakes... You can have it all," she said, and for the first time since I'd met her, her voice trembled. "But understand that I can't protect you if you do. You'll be on your own, Seraphine. Make your choice."

My thoughts spiraled the moment she finished speaking.

Freedom.

The word sounded good—tempting even—but the more I tried to picture it, the less it felt real. What did freedom even mean here? Was it something I *wanted*? Something I'd earned?

Or was it just a way of running away from everything I didn't know how to deal with?

Valeria had done terrible things. That much hadn't changed.

But sitting across from her now, hearing the exhaustion in her voice, watching the cracks in her perfect mask, I couldn't deny that she had also done everything in her power to protect this family.

Even yesterday's disaster... it wasn't negligence, not by a long shot.

It had been a calculated risk gone wrong, and she'd admitted that much outright. And now that the cards were on the table, there was no universe where she'd let something like that happen again.

No—if anything, she'd be even *more* dangerous now; just not to me. Nyxstalker and his people, on the other hand, were walking corpses; they just didn't know it yet.

So what was I really running from? Her methods? Her control?

Or the fact that staying meant accepting I was part of this strange, discordant family now—whether I deserved or wanted to be or not?

The idea of my own apartment definitely had its appeal, no doubt.

Space to breathe, to experiment, to test out new Skills and Perks without prying eyes or awkward explanations. Maybe even try some of the crazier theories about the System that I hadn't dared to attempt in shared quarters.

*'It would mean independence, **real** independence,'* I thought wistfully.

But then the other side of it hit me just as fast.

Without Valeria's reach, I'd have no safety net. No backup plan.

Yesterday had made that brutally clear—I wasn't anywhere near untouchable, not even close.

The thought of losing the invisible protection her name alone carried... It was suffocating.

With the issue of Valir still being out there, biding her time until she could crack me like an egg, other potential gang-related issues arising and potentially making enemies as part of my new Operator license? Once I started working on that side of things, I was bound to make an enemy here or there.

Valeria's existence was a safety net, as long as I was near her, even for those future problems.

And truthfully, I hadn't exactly been stifled living with them. Far from it, honestly.

Gabriel had been the one to get me the SPG-01 shard, to nudge me toward programming in the first place. He'd been my bridge to so many things I wouldn't have learned on my own yet.

Valeria herself had gotten me into the Arkion Dojo; facilitated me meeting Miss K, Kenzie, Jin and Thomas—which I haven't even really figured out how to feel about them all yet.

Living here hadn't limited me—it had accelerated me. I was nowhere near the point where living with them was more of a hindrance than a help.

Freedom sounded nice, sure. But after nearly dying so many times in the past few weeks, freedom also sounded like a luxury I couldn't afford.

Not yet.

My hands tightened around the datapad as that realization sank in, the glow of its screen reflecting in my trembling fingers.

I didn't know if I wanted to stay—but I sure as hell wasn't prepared or really ready to leave...