

Chapter 202 - Persona

I took a moment to recover myself as well—carefully setting aside the guilt from that small, sad flicker I'd caused, and folding it away into the *later* pile where it belonged—before I answered.

"This customer is known as Seraphine," I said, keeping my tone slightly aloof and high-brow, the way I imagined a corporate scion who considered their own time precious would speak to a store owner. "Seraphine is looking for Kinetic Dampening Masks."

Misha's four eyes practically *sparkled* at that.

The subtle shift was unmistakable—the merchant senses kicking into full gear, the near-instantaneous recognition that this particular customer represented a *substantial* amount of Credits walking through the door.

Whatever residual sadness had lingered from the initial mix-up evaporated entirely, replaced by the bright, hungry focus of a shopkeeper who had just heard the words that made their entire day.

"Ahh, an excellent choice!" Misha chirped, bouncing slightly on the spot. "Misha has *many* fine options for the discerning customer! Kinetic Dampening is one of Misha's specialties!"

"Seraphine would like to see a selection," I continued, maintaining the measured, slightly detached cadence. "If Misha has several available for further review, that is."

"Several! Misha has several, yes, yes!" She nodded so vigorously that her whole upper body moved with it, then gestured with one lithe arm toward the depths of the store.

"Please—follow Misha to the back. Much more room to display the good merchandise properly. Better lighting, too! Makes it far easier to review merchandise."

I inclined my head in acknowledgment and followed her toward the backroom, weaving between the towering, precariously-stacked mountains of assorted gear and salvage that I was already *intimately* familiar with as Ela but was very carefully pretending to find mildly novel as Sera.

"Customer Seraphine should browse a little while Misha fetches the merchandise!" Misha announced over her shoulder, already picking up speed. "Misha will be but a moment. Do not touch the sharp things, some of them bite! Misha does not accept complaints about injuries or missing body parts by nosy customers!"

And then she was *gone*—her lithe frame vanishing behind the nearest mountain of stacked crates and half-disassembled equipment, pitter-pattering off into the distance at the frankly *impossible* indoor speeds she somehow managed to achieve in a space this cramped.

Within seconds, the only evidence she'd been there at all was the faint, receding sound of her footfalls and the occasional soft clatter of something being nudged aside or tossed around deeper in the labyrinth.

I let out a slow breath and allowed my ram-rod posture to ease, just slightly, now that I was unobserved.

'It's fucking crazy how good [Double Life] is at this... She's not recognizing me at all. Like not one bit.'

I took the quiet moment to actually reflect on the whole [Double Life] situation, now that the first real stress-test of it seemed to be holding up.

Part of me—a fairly loud part, honestly—kept circling back to the same nagging objection:

'What was even the point of all this?'

Valeria already knew.

She'd figured out the Sera-and-Ela connection ages ago, almost certainly before I'd even realized she had. She'd *hand-delivered* my entire Operator loadout to my room, for god's sake—she *definitely* knew.

If the single most dangerous, most well-connected, most observant person in my orbit had *already* connected the two identities, then what was the actual value in maintaining the split at all? Why go through the whole elaborate charade of dressing up as Sera, using a different bag, keeping my proficiencies hidden, causing that sad little flicker on Misha's face?

But the more I actually thought it through, the more the reasoning held together, all things considered.

Valeria knowing wasn't the same thing as *everyone* knowing. It wasn't even close, really.

Valeria was a single node—an extremely important one, sure, and one I couldn't have hidden from even if I'd wanted to—but she was more than contained.

She had *every* reason in the world to keep the connection buried, because my exposure was simultaneously *her* exposure, in a way.

A scion of the Vildea household moonlighting as a street Operator was the kind of information that could be weaponized against her just as easily as against me.

Her silence wasn't exactly a favor; more self-interest—which was *far* more reliable than any favor could likely ever be in corpo-world terms.

Now, Misha was a completely different kind of node.

Not because I distrusted her—I trusted Misha more than almost anyone in this world, honestly. But trust *wasn't* the issue. It never really was.

Exposure surface was the biggest problem that anyone dealt with, when it came to lies and deception—or so [Deception] had taught me.

Every single person who knew the Sera-Ela connection was one more point of potential failure. One more person who could let something slip in casual conversation, one more person who could be leaned on, surveilled, threatened, or simply *deduced from*.

It didn't matter how loyal Misha was—the more people who held the secret, the more ways it could leak, entirely independent of anyone's intentions.

And Misha *specifically* operated in an information-dense environment, too.

She dealt with Operators, Fixers, Corpsos, Gangers, and god only knew who else, all day, every day. Plus, she was bound by some corporate agreement I didn't know the terms of.

If someone came sniffing around asking about a teenage Operator named Ela—and given people like Valir were *definitely* out there, someone eventually *would*—the fewer connections Misha could honestly draw between Ela *and anything else*, the safer we both were.

What Misha didn't know, she couldn't accidentally reveal, couldn't be compelled to reveal, and couldn't be tricked into revealing.

There was also the simpler, structural reason: Compartmentalization was just *good practice*.

The whole value of [Double Life] as a Perk was that it created a genuine, System-enforced firewall between the two identities.

If I started punching holes in that firewall the moment it became mildly inconvenient—revealing myself here, dropping the act there, "just this once" for someone I liked—then the Perk became worthless.

A secret that you revealed to everyone you personally trusted wasn't a secret anymore.

'And besides,' I thought, glancing toward the direction Misha had vanished, 'if I ever DO decide to tell her—that's a door I can always open later. But once it's open, it never closes again... Better to keep it shut until I'm actually certain it's safe and necessary.'

The sad flicker on her face still stung, of course. But the logic behind it all was sound.

Not to mention, barely an hour from now, Ela would walk through that same door and Misha would get her friend back regardless.

The only real danger that came with this whole charade was the possibility that I might need to bring the KDM in for servicing or repair somewhere down the line—potentially as Ela, if I happened to need a rapid fix before or after a mission and couldn't afford the time to switch into the Sera persona at that particular moment.

At that point, I'd have to come up with a plausible reason for why Ela was walking around with Sera's KDM... But [Deception]—especially now, sitting freshly at Level 4—would likely be able to cook up something halfway decent on the spot. Something that kept the two personas at arm's length from each other even if push came to shove.

A secondhand purchase, maybe. A gig reward from EtherLabs, potentially.

A dozen other cover stories that would hold up to casual scrutiny, surely.

'And if it can't...' I thought, with a small mental shrug. 'Well. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it. Same as all the others.'

I straightened my posture again as I heard the faint sound of Misha's return approaching from somewhere in the depths of the store.

'Back to being Seraphine.'

"Misha returns... *triumphantly!*" she announced, exactly as promised, sweeping back into view with four crates stacked precariously in her overlong arms.

She crossed to a nearby, utterly filled desk—and, without breaking stride or slowing down in the slightest, extended one long foot and swept every piece of merchandise currently occupying its surface clean off in a single fluid motion.

There was a *tremendous* clatter as everything went tumbling to the floor.

I raised one eyebrow, feigning mild curiosity at the display, and let my eyes drift down to the small avalanche of gear she'd just so casually deposited on the ground.

And noticed something that, honestly, impressed me more than I allowed myself to let on.

Not a *single* thing that had actually landed on the bare floor was unprotected.

Every piece of equipment that was "open" to the air—exposed components, delicate instrumentation, anything vulnerable to a fall—had somehow landed cushioned on top of other pieces that were encased in protective cases or shrink-film.

The unprotected stuff had, without exception, come to rest atop the protected stuff. During the single careless-looking foot-sweep, Misha had managed to protect every fragile item in the pile, *somehow*.

'Show-off,' I thought, with a small internal smile that Seraphine's face did not permit to surface. *'Can't say it isn't impressive though. I bet other Gryplik would go crazy about this...'*

Misha, meanwhile, had already moved on—not giving the merchandise a second thought.

She set the four crates down on the freshly-cleared desk and began arranging them with practiced speed—each crate roughly the size and build of a secure pistol case, snapping them open one after another with quick, expert flicks of her clawed fingers.

The moment they opened, each crate cast a warm, soft light down onto the mask nestled within.

And they were *gorgeous*.

I had to actively force the muscles around my eyes to stay neutral—to not widen, to not light up, to not give away even a fraction of how impressed I actually was. Corporate Scion Seraphine would absolutely *not* get excited over merchandise like a kid in a candy store.

She would appraise—even [Appraisal], at times. She would consider. But she would, most of all, remain composed and slightly unimpressed as a matter of principle.

Each of the KDMs was roughly the same shape as the Kinetic Resistance Masks Misha had lent Jade and me during the whole Valir situation—effectively a high-tech theatre mask, sculpted to fit over the face while leaving room for full sensory function.

Misha launched immediately into her sales pitch, gesturing across the four with the enthusiasm of someone showcasing her finest work.

"All four are Tier 2 equipment, yes, yes! Capable of dispersing peak forces equivalent to most T2 firearms!" She held up a warning finger. "Misha does *not* recommend getting shot in the head regardless, of course—the customer should avoid this entirely, always. But should the worst occur? A single shot from such a firearm, the mask will disperse no problem. The customer will live."

She tilted her head, four eyes glittering.

"More than one shot, Misha guarantees nothing—but Misha has *little* doubt her merchandise would preserve the customer's life even on a *second* impact. The mask, however, would take serious damage. And Misha reiterates: Do *not* get shot in the head *repeatedly*. This is bad for the customer *and* bad for the mask." She nodded sagely at her own advice. "Anything below T2 in peak force, the KDM handles with very little difficulty. The customer will feel some of the bleedthrough, as these are not Kinetic Resistance Masks, after all, but it should be more than manageable."

Then her expression shifted, taking on a more serious cast as she gestured emphatically at the masks.

"But—*sustained* force. This is where the KDM has its weakness. Misha wishes to be very clear about this." She held up her long hands and mimed a slow, crushing motion.

"Sustained applied pressure—a Cybernetic Arm attempting to crush the customer's skull, for example, which Misha *strongly* recommends the customer never permit to happen—this would rapidly overwhelm the mask's self-regenerating energy capacitors. It would make the situation harder than *without* the mask, yes. It would buy the customer a few seconds, yes. But it *would* fail after those first few seconds. The KDM is a shield against strikes and impacts, not against a sustained, crushing force."

I gave a slow, considering nod, keeping my expression measured and thoughtful.

"As for the four themselves," Misha continued, brightening back up, "they are more or less identical in function and spec! The differences are in design and size only. And the size—this Misha can adjust! Whatever fit the customer requires, Misha will gladly tailor *precisely*. The customer need only choose the style that speaks to them."

I stepped closer and laid my hands on the masks, one after another, actually taking the time to examine each one properly now that Misha had finished her pitch.

I turned them over in my hands, checked the internal fittings, ran my fingers along the interior padding—and, discreetly, ran [Appraisal] over each one to pull up their stat sheets.

And, much to nobody's surprise, it was just like Misha had said: They were all functionally identical.

Which was, honestly, pretty impressive.

Manufacturing and maintaining four separate pieces of Tier 2 equipment to *identical* performance specifications took genuine skill—and given that my newly-upgraded Tech Attribute was now feeding me a much clearer understanding of exactly *how difficult* that consistency actually was to achieve on far simpler stuff than KDMs, I appreciated it a great deal more than Seraphine's neutral expression let on.

Most importantly, however, I found the one thing that I had specifically come here for, at the bottom of each stat sheet.

[Gryplik Maintenance].

The special attribute I'd been counting on. Misha's signature, in a way.

It meant significantly more durability than I'd have gotten from a KDM sourced *anywhere else* in Neo Avalis—the kind of self-maintaining resilience that came baked into anything a Gryplik of Misha's caliber personally fabricated or serviced.

It was, quite frankly, the whole reason I'd steered this purchase toward Misha in the first place, instead of letting Valeria source it from whatever contacts she undoubtedly had.

A genuine win-win, all around, no doubt: Misha got a substantial pile of Credits; I got the single best KDM that Valeria's money could buy.

Perfectly balanced—as all things should be.

With the practical evaluation done, I let myself actually appreciate the four of them as *objects*.

Much like the Kinetic Resistance Masks I'd used during the Valir situation, each of these could be turned fully translucent—clear as glass—with a simple double-tap from the wearer, letting the wearer's actual face show through when they didn't want the intimidation or anonymity of the solid mask.

But when they *weren't* translucent, when they sat opaque and active across the face, they were genuinely gorgeous pieces of functional art.

The first was styled after an Oni—a demon-mask, red and fierce, all sharp angles and glowering menace. It reminded me strongly of the KRM I'd worn before, though notably *without* the physical embellishments that version had carried.

No horns, no protruding features... Probably because the KDM simply didn't have the energy or budget headroom to include those kinds of functional bonuses on top of everything else it was doing.

'Still very striking though.'

The second was a very literal theatre mask—split down the middle, half a smiling face, half a weeping one.

It was, I had to admit, pretty damn creepy.

'Would look absolutely terrifying coming at someone out of a dark alley, no doubt...'

Not exactly the aesthetic I was going for with either of my personas, however.

The third carried a shinobi-style pattern—a black-cloth wrap across the mouth and forehead, leaving only a narrow band open around the eyes.

It read as very professional, strangely enough. Personally, I would have expected the ninja-style mask to look tacky, but somehow it just didn't.

A strong contender, despite my initial reluctance.

Now the last one, though...

The last one caught my attention the moment my eyes landed on it, and I could not entirely suppress the small smile that tugged at the corner of my lips.

It was a kitsune mask, kept in orange and black. Fox-pattern-featured, with elegant lines and distinctive markings that were close to ones I had, in fact, seen up *very* close and *very* recently.

'Kenzie...? Is this you?' I thought to myself, entirely amused, as I picked it up and turned it over in my hands. *'What are the actual odds of something like this existing here, right now, on the exact day after I met up with Kenzie?'*

I turned the mask slowly, watching the light catch the etched detailing.

'Is this some kind of joke, World? Did the System put you up to this specifically to mess with me or something?'

There was very little doubt in my mind which of the four I was going to walk out with, at this point.

'When the World nudges you a certain way on a cosmetic choice like this,' I mused, thumbing the edge of the kitsune mask with something approaching fondness, *'who are you to fight against it...?'*

"Seraphine will take the fourth option," I announced, setting the kitsune mask back down atop its crate with a measured, unhurried motion.

Misha's four eyes lit up all over again, but before she could launch into whatever celebratory response was already forming, I raised a hand and continued.

"There is a stipulation, however. Seraphine will require a period of several days to have this piece of equipment reviewed by a third party—with the understanding that a full refund is to be available, should the mask be found lacking in any way."

The words felt genuinely, deeply insulting even as I said them, and I was internally very aware of it thanks to [Cultural Savant].

To question the quality of a Gryplik's work—to have the sheer *audacity* to imply that something Misha had personally taken care of and stood behind might not measure up—was, from what I understood of Gryplik culture, roughly equivalent to walking into someone's home and spitting on their ancestors.

It was a *genuine* slight—one that would get hands thrown for it, in different circumstances.

But Misha only briefly grimaced in my direction. Ever so slightly—a small flicker of something across her expression, there and gone—before she smoothed it over and nodded with professional grace.

"Ahh, Misha understands," she said, and to her considerable credit, she sounded like she genuinely did. "Corporate guidelines are not unknown to Misha. Many of Misha's clients require such arrangements. Misha will bring out the usual agreement."

She tilted her head. "Three days would be sufficient, yes?"

I considered it for a moment.

Valeria should have no trouble reaching a decision within three days—the woman made high-stakes calls faster than most people made breakfast.

"Three days is acceptable," I confirmed magnanimously.

Misha nodded and produced a standard inspection-and-return agreement, then walked me through the relevant clauses with brisk professionalism.

Once that was handled, she presented me with the price.

I nearly had my eyes pop straight out of my skull.

"That will be 1,350 Credits for the Mask—plus agreement."

I kept the calm facade absolutely locked in place, not letting so much as a twitch reach my expression. Internally, some part of my brain was absolutely *screaming* about the number, running frantic comparisons against my usual twenty-eight-Credits-to-my-name reality.

But externally? Seraphine Vildea did not so much as blink.

And I didn't haggle.

Not even a token attempt.

A corporate scion of any standing would not bother lowering herself to negotiate over such a *meager* sum. It would have broken character entirely. So I simply slotted in the restricted shard Valeria had left me, and confirmed the purchase without a word of protest.

It took a few long, awkward moments—and I was praying to all the gods of this world and the last one, that Valeria was attentive as always—before I finally got the confirmation.

[Shard-Lender has approved the transaction of 1350 Credits to "Misha's Emporium" for "Kinetic Dampening Mask - Fox". An attached note is available.]

[Displaying Note: "I trust you have made the proper arrangements regarding the inspection. Leave the Mask on the kitchen table."]

I let out a quiet, internal breath of relief.

"A pleasure doing business," I said, with imperious brevity, inclining my head slightly toward Misha. "Seraphine wishes Misha a good day."

And with that, I turned on my heel and walked out of the Emporium, KDM case in hand, maintaining the composed, unhurried pace of someone who had somewhere important to be but was in no particular rush to get there.

The moment I was clear of the store and back into the flow of the thoroughfare, though, I let the persona loosen and started actually thinking through my logistics.

'Alright. Hurry home, put the case on the kitchen table like the note said, then switch clothes and head straight back out as Ela to ask Misha about the shard—and the eyeballs.' I paused mid-thought, glancing down and to my left. *'Ugh... If I'd known I was going to be heading straight home right after buying the thing anyway, I wouldn't have bothered lugging the bag and Ela's outfit along with me in the first place.'*

I looked at the bag hanging loosely from my other hand—full of Ela's Operator clothing, contributing absolutely nothing to this leg of the trip except being dead weight I now had to carry all the way back home.

I sighed. "Haaa... Well. Better safe than sorry, I guess..."