

Chapter 142 - Consequentia I

I didn't even get the chance to fully process what that sound meant before everything went straight to hell.

"Oliver, the kids!" Valeria snapped, somehow already on her feet.

She didn't hesitate—grabbed the chair she'd just been sitting on with one hand and hurled it across the room, dead center toward the short hallway that led to the main door.

The crash of it barely registered before Oliver was already in motion too, launching himself *over* the table like it wasn't even there.

One moment he was sitting across from us as confused as we were, and the next he was already airborne, crashing into both me and Gabriel like a human battering ram.

"Wha—" was all Gabriel managed before the three of us hit the floor in a heap. The table went with us, toppling over with a heavy **thud**, in a mess of plates, silverware, and the remains of our definitely-too-expensive dinner.

Then—

Boom.

The apartment *exploded*.

The front door didn't open—it *launched*.

Ripped clean off its hinges, shot into the room like a railgun round the size of a riot shield. It slammed into the far wall with a sickening crunch, half-burying itself in solid rockcrete like it was nothing.

At the same time, the kitchen simply *imploded*.

The outside floor-facing wall gave way first, then the fridge came flying out like it had been punted by a mech. It slammed into the opposite wall with a hollow metal *clang*, while the oven-stove combo tore through the air and crashed spine-first into the central rockcrete counter, crumpling into scrap metal on impact.

My ears were *screaming*—ringing so hard I couldn't even tell if I was shouting or silent.

Everything spun.

I must've hit my head on the way down, because the lights overhead blurred into streaks and my limbs felt like they were lagging behind my thoughts.

But I could tell I was moving—being dragged.

Away from the wreckage. Someone had me.

This was absolutely no time to play coy, I thankfully somehow managed to put together.

I flicked my Ego on.

The effect was instant—ice in my veins, my vision clearing up and the static in my thoughts wiped clean. The ringing in my ears flattened out into silence, letting my mind *function* again.

I still couldn't hear shit, but it stopped being completely debilitating.

Oliver had both me and Gabriel by the collars, dragging us backwards with one arm while pulling the kitchen table with the other, using it as a makeshift barrier.

He was moving fast, hauling us toward our shared bedroom.

Away from the kitchen. Away from the breach.

And Valeria—Valeria had *moved toward* the chaos.

I caught a glimpse of her through the dust and smoke, and my brain short-circuited for a second.

She was elbow-deep in the rockcrete kitchen counter—the same one that had just taken a hit from a flying oven like it was a battering ram.

Her expression didn't even twitch as she pulled something out.

A gun. No, not just a gun—a *hand-cannon*.

Matte black, wide-barreled, the kind of weapon that didn't come with a serial number. It looked more like a personal anti-materiel solution than anything meant for a sidearm.

And her arm? Not a single scratch.

'What the actual fuck?!'

That was about all I managed to think—right before the chaos found a way to get even worse.

Figures in full black body armor stormed into the apartment through the shredded openings—through what used to be the hallway door and the gaping hole where the kitchen wall had been moments before.

No markings, no logos, nothing to ID them by at all.

But my brain had no trouble slotting them into a category: *'Corpo agents...!'*

Had to be.

Nobody else came in like this—fully coordinated and ruthless enough to use high explosives in a residential floor, especially not one owned by another Corporation.

The very second the first figure crossed the threshold, I felt a resonant *thud* ripple through my chest as Valeria's hand-cannon roared from behind the mangled kitchen counter she'd turned into cover.

The shot connected instantly, and the agent's head—the helmet, faceplate, everything—just *evaporated*.

A misty cloud of gore hung briefly in the air where their head used to be, the body simply dropping to the ground like a sack of algae.

At nearly the exact same moment, the ceiling at the center of the apartment exploded downward, plaster and rockcrete shrapnel scattering in every direction.

A sleek, automated turret unfolded rapidly from inside, humming as it locked onto something I could barely glimpse in the hallway—a shadowy figure, frantically shoving aside the wreckage of Valeria's chair.

Two heavy, concussive shots punched through the chaos, echoing in my chest.

The black-armored figure didn't even manage to hit the ground—the impact of the rounds ripped them out of view, sending them collapsing silently into the darkness of the floor's hallway beyond.

Then, just as fast as it had emerged, the turret went still again, smoke rising gently from its muzzle.

For half a heartbeat, there was silence.

And then everything went straight back to hell before I could gather a single thought or come up with a plan of action on how to react to all of this.

The assault didn't stop to give me that time.

If anything, it escalated.

More of them poured in—similarly black-clad, faceless, rifles already up but now *pre-firing* as they breached. Muzzle flashes lit up the apartment like strobe lights, rounds pinging off every surface with deafening fury.

Bullets ricocheted wildly, the walls sparked, hit furniture exploded into splinters, and somewhere behind me, a painting hung on our walls burst into a thousand pieces like it had been waiting for a reason.

One round slammed into the edge of the kitchen table we were crouched behind with a sharp, teeth-rattling **crack**.

Splinters of metal and ceramic plating exploded out across my face and arms. Gabriel yelped beside me, but it was muffled, distant—my ears still trying to recover from the initial explosion.

Meanwhile, the turret held the hallway, its twin barrels letting out rhythmic bursts every few seconds—each one slamming like a steel fist into the corridor. I couldn't see if it was hitting anything from where I was tucked against the floor, but judging by the lack of return fire from that direction, it was doing its job.

For now.

But Valeria was a different kind of storm entirely.

She moved behind the counter with seriously practiced fluidity—ducking, pivoting, leaning out just long enough to fire off another brutal shot.

Each time she did, the result was *devastating*.

One shot caught a breacher mid-sprint.

The round hit center mass, and his torso simply *detonated*.

Armor cracked open like a cheap toy, ribs turned to shrapnel, and what was left of his lungs splashed against the wall in a thick, red smear.

Another shot blew straight through a helmet, vaporizing skull and brain in one violent instant—leaving a neck stump gushing blood as the corpse slumped forward and twitched, rifle clattering uselessly to the floor.

Another assailant barely had time to train their weapon towards her before Valeria snapped to the side and *hammered* a shot into their thigh. The leg exploded below the knee, sending them collapsing sideways, screaming, only for a follow-up shot to take their head off mid-fall.

Still, they kept coming.

Four more. Then a fifth.

Three from the kitchen breach, two from the hallway—no hesitation, just bodies feeding into the grinder, pre-programmed movement and fire patterns, their goal obvious: Overwhelm us.

But then—

Boom.

A flash of light burst through the hallway.

The turret jerked once, then was *ripped* from the ceiling in a hail of fire and twisted metal.

It hit the floor hard, skidding across the floor in a shrieking pile of debris, sparks and flame licking off its shattered core. One of its barrels clanged once as it spun loose from the wreckage and rolled to a stop by the edge of the tipped-over couch.

'*Fuck!*' Was the first conscious thought I managed since the first agent had lost their head, realising that the destruction of the turret meant that nothing was holding the hallway anymore.

I also now realised I was still holding the cutlery from the dinner, my fork and the steak knife.

I simply stared at the knife in my hand like it was personally insulting me for being there.

'What the fuck am I supposed to do with a fucking steak knife in this situation?! I don't... I don't have my gear... And even if I did, this is way above my fucking level, fuck!'

Valeria, meanwhile, didn't waste the moment like I was.

She pivoted sharply and eliminated the three intruders flooding through the kitchen breach with surgical brutality—three shots, three shredded bodies.

One collapsed backward out of the breach, head half-missing.

Another dropped mid-step, chest blown open in a grotesque flower of bone and red mist.

The third barely had time to raise their rifle before she put a round through their clavicle, the exit wound painting the far wall in arterial arcs.

She didn't slow down.

In the next heartbeat, she was already shifting toward the hallway breach, taking both fronts like it was routine. Two quick shots and she was already aiming back towards the kitchen.

Another figure stepped into the breach—too slow of a follow-up.

Valeria's hand-cannon roared one final time. **Boom.**

Without hesitation, somehow realising it was empty—or so I hoped—she hurled the weapon straight at the next incoming assailant with enough speed to *whistle* through the air.

The heavy pistol struck center-mass and crumpled the agent like a ragdoll, the blow carrying enough force to knock them clean off their feet and into the nearby wall.

I doubted I could've matched that kind of throw even with [Blademaster's Throw] active.

Now unarmed, she was already charging forward at the other person stepping inside the breach behind the pair.

Two rounds hit her in the shoulder and hip—full-auto bursts that would've dropped anyone else. She didn't even flinch. She *slammed* into the next invader full-force, grabbed them, and drove her fist straight through it.

Not into. *Through.*

Armor buckled. Ribs shattered like twigs.

Her hand punched through meat, straight through the heart, and burst out the back in a fountain of blood and shredded gore. The agent convulsed violently, choking on nothing, already dead—his body just hadn't realized it yet, hanging limp and twitching on her forearm like a skewered puppet.

Without breaking stride, Valeria stepped over to the one she'd dropped with the thrown hand-cannon. He was still moving, just barely, trying to recover from the sudden, heavy impact.

She ended that with a clean, brutal downward kick—her high heel driving straight through the center of his visor.

The crack of reinforced polymer, the crunch of bone beneath it followed by the sound of metal scraping into rockcrete—it was final.

She didn't bother retrieving the shoe either. Just left it there, embedded through his skull and into the kitchen-floor beneath, and kept going barefoot.

Valeria didn't stop moving.

She twisted with the corpse still impaled, grabbing the dangling rifle now swinging from its shoulder harness.

Then she turned.

Right back towards the open hallway.

Rounds zipped past, two more black-clad shapes pressing through, filling the gap the turret had once covered. Valeria lifted the corpse—still stuck on her arm like a grotesque shield—and glanced briefly at the rifle.

Half a second passed, then it beeped. A green LED flickered on.

Recognition flashed in her eyes.

She raised it and opened fire, spraying controlled bursts down the corridor while moving, ducking behind the remains of the half-exploded and ripped apart counter.

The arm still impaled the corpse like a riot shield, angling it into the hail of bullets that kept slamming into it with sickening, wet *thuds*.

Each shot made the body jolt, twitching unnaturally as rounds tore through ruined armor and pulverized what was left underneath. Bits of ceramic plate flaked off like dead bark.

But somehow, it still held—for now.

And me? I was frozen.

Crumpled behind the overturned kitchen table, just *staring*, my brain barely keeping up.

It hadn't even been ten seconds since the explosions tore the apartment open.

My heart was still hammering like it was trying to break out of my chest despite my Ego's best efforts to calm me down.

Meanwhile, Valeria was *out there*, taking on a goddamn black-ops hit squad with nothing but a corpse, a borrowed rifle, and sheer corporate rage—and she was somehow seemingly *winning*?!

‘What the fuck am I even supposed to do here?!’

My eyes darted around, desperate for *anything* I could use. *‘Come on, come on—think! If I had my knives, I could—’*

My Ego forcibly cooled down my thoughts. *‘Could **what**, exactly? Get myself killed faster? Their armor would just eat my knives, even with [Sharpen], like they were cosplay-tier. At best, I’d piss one of them off before getting ventilated.’*

I felt the floor shift under me and snapped my head around.

Oliver was still dragging all three of us—me, Gabriel, and the goddamn *kitchen table*—toward the hallway leading to our rooms.

His face was all clenched jaw and tunnel vision, legs moving like pistons.

“Do we have more guns?!” I shouted, barely hearing my own voice over the chaos.

He didn’t even turn, just shook his head sharply, still dead set on getting us out of the blast zone.

“*Fuck!*” I hissed, turning back toward the front of the apartment, scanning again, reaching for any half-baked idea that could make a dent in the situation.

There *was* something—my neural link still had a single charge of [Venombite] loaded from the Operator Meeting earlier. One hit only, before it would kill me—I hadn’t exactly designed it for mass-usage, after all.

Except... I was behind cover, with no angle.

And even if I *did* somehow hit someone, and even if it *did* somehow manage to get through whatever Corporate-ICE they all undoubtedly had chipped, it wasn’t like these bastards were gonna stop and politely wait for the quick-hack to run its course.

These weren’t stupid scavs—they were here for one reason, and subtlety wasn’t on that list.

They weren’t here to talk. They were here to *end* whatever Corpo-war this was.

While I was struggling with all that, Valeria simply dropped two more with clinical precision.

Controlled bursts—one to the throat, another straight through the visor of a breacher trying to flank. Both dropped like bags of meat, one crumpling over the remnants of the chair she’d tossed earlier, the other folding mid-step and skidding across the broken floor.

Then, without pause, she tossed the rifle like it was spent—which it probably was—and let the mangled corpse that had served as her shield slide off her arm with a wet, sickening ***schlunk***.

It hit the floor with a thud, limbs splayed at awkward angles, what was left of its armor barely holding shape.

Valeria exhaled hard. Not dramatic, but heavy enough to see.

Her shoulders rose and fell once—measured, but taxed.

She ducked behind the kitchen counter again just... *breathing*.

That's when I heard it.

A voice—male, distorted through static in my ears and the chaos, filtering in from the breached kitchen wall.

"Ten seconds, huh? Not bad. But seems like you're running out of options, *Viper*."

The name hit like a nail through the room.

"Would be a lot easier if you just gave up, you know?"

I blinked. My hearing had apparently stabilized enough to parse words clearly again, if still filtered like they were coming through a half-broken headset.

Valeria didn't miss a beat.

"That's not proper decorum," she replied flatly, as if correcting someone's email etiquette.

A second later three more of them came in through the breach—tight formation, tactical movement, rifles raised, sweeping like they expected her to be pinned.

Bad guess.

Valeria suddenly *moved*.

She *literally* disappeared from behind the counter, only to re-appear in a blur as she *slammed* into the first guy like a freight train.

The sound of the impact was like a miniature explosion, as the agent's bones and armour folded into itself. He flew backward, crashing into the side of the destroyed fridge with a crunch that bent steel.

Before he even hit the ground, she had already pivoted into the second one, catching his rifle mid-swing and *ripping* it out of his hands with a single wrench of her arm.

He tried to throw an instinctive punch to catch Valeria while she was off-balance from the disarm.

But Valeria simply ducked under it with impossible speed, stepped in close, and drove her knee upward into his stomach.

Armor cracked and crumpled.

Air left his lungs in a strangled wheeze—just in time for her to catch the back of his helmet and *slam* it down onto the remains of the kitchen counter at her side.

The crack was wet and final, leaving nothing but a gory lump where his head had been.

The third one actually managed to fire.

A short burst caught her across the ribs and thigh. Blood sprayed—but she kept coming, shrugging it off like it was nothing. She closed distance mid-dodge, slipping under the follow-up shot with inhuman speed.

Her fist caught him in the jaw and spun his entire body halfway around. Before he could even stumble, she kicked the back of his knee out, grabbed the back of his vest, and *ripped* his entire head off with a fluid, abrupt pull.

Three heartbeats. Three bodies.

She stood there for a breath, blood-slick and towering over the broken mess of bodies at her feet. Her wounds leaked freely—shoulder, side, leg—but if they were slowing her down, she didn't show it.

'Holy f—'

The thought barely formed before my eyes went wide in horror.

Suddenly, there was someone *next* to her.

A large man, armored head to toe, had appeared out of *nowhere*, just like she'd disappeared from the counter and re-appeared mid-sprint when she bodyslammed that first guy.

The man didn't waste time.

He seized Valeria by the arm and *hurled* her across the kitchen like she weighed nothing.

She slammed into the wall hard enough to crack it from the impact, the plaster spiderwebbing behind her back. A sharp grunt left her lips, followed by a spray of blood that painted the tile below in crimson streaks.

But she didn't stay down.

Valeria pushed off the ground and *launched* herself back at him immediately, striking with a speed and precision that would've obliterated any of the previous opponents.

Her elbow drove into his ribs with a crack, followed by a palm strike to his helmet that sent his head snapping sideways. She spun low, sweeping at his knees, but he stepped through it, grunting as he absorbed the blow and brought a gauntleted fist straight into her jaw.

She stumbled, but retaliated immediately—two lightning-fast punches to his torso, then a vicious upward knee that dented the front plate of his chest armor, sending him stumbling.

But it didn't matter.

He barely managed to catch her next strike mid-swing, using the leverage of the strike to twist her arm behind her back, and *slammed* her into the wall again—even harder this time.

The crack echoed through the apartment, louder than the gunfire before.

His forearm braced across her throat, pinning her in place, crushing her against the cracked wall.

Valeria choked out another breath, jaw clenched, struggling against the hold—but she was trapped, the sheer brute force of the man too difficult to fight against.

Her fingers twitched, trying to reach for something, anything, but the pressure kept her locked down, feet dangling in the air.

Then came the others.

Five more black-clad figures swept into the apartment, split between the two breaches.

Two peeled off immediately toward Valeria, rifles lowered but ready.

They moved to her sides, grabbing her arms and locking her down with tight, practiced motions, putting their entire weight onto her arms and shoulders as the big man pushed her face-first to the ground.

The other three saw us.

And they moved fast.

Boots thundered across the floor as they rushed toward our makeshift barricade—toward me, Gabriel, and Oliver—rifles already rising into firing position.

I was half-expecting them to just raise their rifles and light us up.

But instead, they swarmed us, moving fast and with a clear purpose in mind.

One of them *ripped* Oliver away from our side like he weighed nothing, tossing him a few meters, slamming him to the floor, and pinning him with a knee between the shoulder blades.

Gabriel barely got a sound out before he was yanked down the same way.

Then me.

I hit the floor *hard*, the breath knocked out of me, and before I could react, a boot pinned my back and a knee dropped right onto the base of my neck. Pain lanced down my spine as my face was shoved into the carpet, the rough weave scraping against my cheek.

I could barely move—barely *breathe*.

Pure, unadulterated panic flared inside me, hot and utterly useless.

But my Ego was somehow still running, keeping the worst of it at bay. Just barely.

'Think, think—there's gotta be something—'

Then it suddenly hit me. *'There is... This is a security issue!'*

I forced my cerebral interface to open, doing my best to navigate the menu with my eyes half-blinded, still rammed into the floor. I pulled up the messaging prompt, mentally racing over the keyboard inside the neural command structure.

[HELP US! CORPO AGENTS!] I fired off the message to Mr. Stirling with everything I had.

For half a heartbeat, I had hope.

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent.]

The words hit harder than the knee on my neck.

'They... they fucking jammed us...'

That must have been what Valeria had picked up on earlier.

That flicker of confusion on her face.

All her comms, all her contacts, all her connections that she undoubtedly had running 24/7—abruptly cut off, throwing errors.

I tried again, desperate for the *one single play* I had to work out somehow.

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent.]

'Again...!'

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent.]

'Again...! Come on!'

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent.]

'COME ON, FUCKING PLEASE WORK!'

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent.]

'Please...'

[Error: No connected network detected. Message could not be sent...]