

Chapter 152 - Remuneration

Staring at the lines of text glowing across the datapad, I wasn't really seeing any of it.

My eyes tracked the words, sure, but my brain refused to process them.

Everything from the last hour kept looping through my head, fragments of conversation clashing with each other until I couldn't tell which part had hit me hardest.

I'd imagined a lot of different ways this talk could've gone—most of them unpleasant—but I'd clearly been wrong on every front.

Completely wrong.

Out of everything I could've predicted, Valeria offering me *freedom* like this had never even made the list.

She'd always struck me as someone who needed to have her hands in every detail, every variable under her thumb. That was just who she was—a control freak with corporate polish... Or so I thought.

And yeah, technically, if she still owned or financed whatever apartment I picked, she'd still have influence.

But this? This was still a choice. A deliberate step back. A lowering of her control.

A concession, ultimately. Maybe a reward for deeds done right in her eyes, but still a concession nevertheless.

Either way, something had shifted in our relationship.

Too many things had, honestly.

The amount of information she'd dropped on me tonight was the kind of thing that would take days—*weeks*—to even begin to unpack. But I didn't have that time.

Valeria wanted an answer *now*.

Which, to be fair, was very on-brand for her. Manipulative, yeah, but also logical.

She had momentum right now—leverage to extract reparations from EtherLabs for the whole disaster. Even if Nyxstalker's attack had been partially her fault, she could still spin it into a payout, maybe even get special dispensation for "family recovery."

That meant she needed my answer ready before her meeting with the board or whatever inspectors came crawling through to pick apart this mess.

'*Neo Avalis proper is out,*' I decided almost immediately, cutting that option from the list in my head. '*No safety net, no backup, no Creds, no chance. Not unless I want to end up as some Scav's next payday.*'

'Fenwylde Academy,' on the other hand, caught me off guard. I hadn't even considered it.

Still... I couldn't help but shake my head slightly. *'Not exactly what I'm looking for.'*

Sure, the education there would be top-tier.

Access to rare Skills, training, information—the kind of education and access to connections most people would kill for. And the System-related experience and unlocks I could get my hands on there? Invaluable.

But I wasn't built for an Academy Arc, not with everything else I had going on already.

It would make my whole Operator path a lot more difficult to pursue and would likely mean my trips to the Arkion Dojo and Mr. Shori's would also be at an end. Much less meeting up with Jade on a semi-regular basis and figuring out what was going on with that side of things.

Still, I couldn't deny what I'd undoubtedly be missing. Fenwylde was an absolute goldmine of opportunity, and there probably wouldn't be another one like it.

That part stung without doubt.

But that, ultimately, left the third option: An apartment on the same floor.

At first glance, it sounded perfect. Independence without isolation. A buffer, but still within reach for security purposes. But as I turned it over in my head, it started to feel hollow.

'What's the point of having my own place if I've got nothing to fill it with?' I thought bitterly. *'Freedom's great and all, but it only matters if I've actually got something to **do** with it. I don't have the resources, the Skills, or the gear to justify it yet.'*

So what then? Stick around? Keep living with Valeria, Oliver, and Gabriel, just like before?

Wait until Gabe left for Fenwylde and I was stuck here with the two of them?

It wasn't exactly a thrilling thought.

But by the time Gabriel recovered enough to even *think* about the Academy, I'd hopefully have something else lined up. Maybe more advancements on the Operator side, maybe a better grasp on my Skills—something that'd let me go at things under my own steam.

Still... declining *everything* just didn't sit right.

I'd *more* than earned this. Bled for it. Nearly died for it.

Letting it all pass me by felt wrong, like walking away from a prize I'd already fought for.

Even if the current setup—living with the rest of the family—was technically the smartest move, I couldn't just shrug and take nothing.

So I made up my mind.

Meeting Valeria's eyes, I set the datapad down and pushed it back across the table. The faint slide of coated aluminium on wood seemed louder than it should've been.

She raised an eyebrow, sharp even in her fatigue.

"I'll stay with the family," I said, keeping my tone steady, deliberate. Not emotional but instead measured. The same kind of calm, calculated tone she herself used when making an offer sound like a done deal. "But I want a different kind of remuneration instead of an apartment. The same level of investment—just redirected toward something more immediately useful. For me *and* the family."

Her expression didn't change, but I could feel her full focus bear down on me.

I knew this was a gamble.

I didn't want to expose too much about what I'd been doing with my free time or what my real intentions were, but that was unavoidable now.

One way or another, this conversation was always going to happen.

I took a steadying breath, feeling [Negotiation] flicker to life like a spark in the back of my head—followed, unexpectedly, by [Appraise].

Both adjusting, calibrating, guiding my phrasing as I shaped the next words carefully.

"I want access to a firearm," I said. "Something similar to the one you used yesterday—capable of punching through the kind of armor those corpo agents were wearing. I'll need the corresponding carry licenses for Delta, plus regular access to a firing range. Preferably with an instructor—someone reliable. I don't want to learn bad habits by teaching myself. You can't always be around and even if you are, having a second person capable of defending Oliver and Gabriel will undoubtedly be worthwhile."

My first real gambit.

But one I needed to make.

Because the truth was obvious now: Between Valir's crew of thugs and Nyxstalker's strike team, knives alone weren't enough anymore.

They were great when I had initiative—when I could ambush, when silence mattered.

But when the fight started on someone else's terms?

I had nothing. No range, no power, no way to turn the tide once things went loud except for my Trait's Ability, which was only usable once.

That *needed* to change.

And I clearly didn't have the luxury of time on my side to get this fixed; a band-aid was needed.

“Also—” I said, forcing the words out, “I want access to hard knowledge. Actual data-shards on topics I can’t just pull off a public node. Let’s say... three topics, to be chosen later.”

I had checked the value in my head with [Appraise], letting the Skill spit back a rough worth estimate. It felt like hedging my bets out loud, but I had needed to know what I was asking for before I had asked for it.

I’d already known this request would sound weird.

Knowledge-shards weren’t the same currency as Skill Shards.

The latter were the shiny, instantly useful things corps handed out to grunts: Slot a Skill Shard in, and you suddenly knew how to do a job—muscle memory and all—until you took it out again. Perfect for keeping people effective and dependent.

Corporations loved them because they were knowledge control baked into training.

Knowledge-shards, though, were different.

They were rare because deep, specific information didn’t just float around in public caches. Without an internet or public libraries; information was hoarded like bullion—private repositories, dead nets, academic vaults.

You didn’t buy a Skill Shard to learn *how* a thing worked, just to be able to use it; you bought a Knowledge-shard to understand *why* it worked, to see the hidden edges and make real decisions through actual learned knowledge.

They were more like condensed books than anything resembling Skill Shards. Personal aptitude in learning, time investment and dedication was required to make them work.

Less flashy, less immediately tradable or useful, but for me—way more valuable.

They were the kind of items that would actually move the needle appreciably for some of the harder-to-train Skills in the System, of that, there was no doubt.

[Accounting] being the prime example from the partial Knowledge-shards I had obtained during my brief-stint at the hospital after that one time at the Arkion Dojo where Kenzie had gotten a good hit in—and ripped my damn eyes out.

So yeah, asking for three of those would undoubtedly make Valeria cock an eyebrow.

She’d no doubt puzzle over why I wanted raw information instead of turnkey skills.

But I couldn’t see another practical path: Unless she could hand me military-grade Skill Shards—very unlikely—Knowledge-shards were the clearest route to get the exact, usable competence I needed to get my hands on.

I considered pushing my luck—one more request, maybe something small to round it out. But before I could even open my mouth, [Appraise] flickered in the back of my mind like a quiet warning.

The mental tag it dropped wasn't about Credits—it was about weight.

'Social capital cost: extreme.'

And yeah, that tracked.

Getting a firearms license for something capable of punching through corpo-grade armor in a *Megabuilding*, of all places, wasn't exactly standard procedure. That kind of approval didn't come cheap, not in a building policed by the same kind of agents I wanted the weapon against in the first place.

Even Valeria would have to pull quite a few strings for that.

And the Knowledge Shards? Each one of those would be like being handed months of private instruction. The kind of thing that could push a Skill well into the upper tiers on its own. Just one of them was essentially impossible for me to acquire. Three? That was already brushing the limit of what I could reasonably expect, even from her.

So I held my tongue, letting the offer stand.

Valeria studied me for a long moment. Then, finally, she gave a small nod.

"Very well. The firearm can be arranged—but only once your training meets acceptable standards. You will complete the full course under supervision, and I will personally determine when you are ready to carry it."

I blinked, suppressing the instinct to argue.

She raised a hand slightly, continuing before I could say anything.

"As for the Knowledge Shards, I'll require a list of five topics. I will see to the procurement of three from that list. Some subjects are... less accessible than others, even for me."

Her tone was back to polished efficiency now—still soft, still worn down, but unshakably corporate.

I mulled it over in silence.

It made sense—both requests did.

The firearm condition wasn't a power move; it was just smart. As far as Valeria knew, I'd never handled a gun in my life, and giving me something high-caliber without oversight would be beyond reckless, even if I had proven that I could potentially hold my own yesterday.

The Knowledge Shard stipulation was equally reasonable too, considering how difficult they were to acquire otherwise. And, not to mention, it gave her the ability to filter what she didn't want me poking into—something I'd do, too, if I were in her position.

As always, her logic was bulletproof. Maddeningly so.

It was like she'd been born with an internal flowchart for every argument.

[Negotiation] whispered its verdict before I even thought to counter: *Deal should be accepted; optimal outcome achieved.*

In other words, I wasn't getting a better one unless Valeria suddenly felt like being charitable—which she never did.

So I inclined my head slightly. "Agreed."

Her smirk returned—small, genuine, the kind of smile that didn't look quite natural on her but fit in a strange, unsettling way. "My new daughter is definitely an interesting one."

I froze for half a second, clamping down on every muscle to stop my reaction from showing.

The words hit harder than I'd expected.

It was—by every measure—an acknowledgment of what I'd chastised her for earlier.

Acceptance, even.

Before I could even start to process what her words might mean for us going forward, Valeria was already continuing on.

"With all necessary arrangements concluded," she said, straightening her posture as much as her unresponsive right side allowed, "I am afraid I have to cut our discussion short, Seraphine. I will not allow the investigators any room to maneuver or manipulate the narrative of this... tragedy. I must return to the scene before their arrival."

I nodded, though my mind was still half-stuck on the "*my new daughter*" comment from earlier. It sat uncomfortably heavy in my chest, like something too difficult to process all at once.

"We will have more opportunities for these kinds of... *exchanges*," she continued, her tone softening just a touch. "I will make sure of it. We will also discuss Anima in greater detail, but that will have to wait. I cannot say when things will return to normal on my end, but I promise you will not be inconvenienced any longer than absolutely necessary."

I was taken aback by that, not having expected her to straight up offer to talk about Anima like this, but it was definitely a welcome change.

"You will remain in the apartment for today," she added firmly, that signature finality threading back into her tone. "I have stationed four of my most trusted officers outside. There is no reason to be afraid—nothing will happen to you under their watch. I have also contacted both Mr. Shori and Miss Kanis to inform them that you will be unable to attend your sessions today. I made it abundantly clear the matter was beyond your control, of course."

Her composure faltered slightly as she pushed herself up from the chair, the limpness of her right side making the motion slow and unsteady. I instinctively started to move to help her before even really thinking about it, but the look she shot me froze me mid-movement.

"I *will* handle the rest, Seraphine," she said, voice steady but drained. "Rest. Recover. Your injuries are not something you have the luxury to ignore."

She paused for a heartbeat, meeting my eyes with that same intensity she always had—just... quieter this time.

"I will return once the investigators have been dealt with. Until then, think about everything that's happened, but do not let it consume you." A faint smile ghosted across her face, more weary than warm. "Rest—that is your number one priority."

And just like that, she turned away and walked off, the heavy limp in her step somehow not marring the dignity of her exit.

I stayed seated, the echoes of her words—and the sheer abruptness of how the whole conversation had ended—pinning me to the chair like plasteel bands.

My mind drifted back to the deals I'd made, trying to process everything.

The requests I'd put forward, the terms she'd set, the way she'd said "*my new daughter*".

The words still echoed in my head, quiet but weighty.

I couldn't tell if there'd been more to them—if she'd meant them, or if it was just her way of mirroring what I'd said earlier, a corporate habit of language-mirroring dressed up as sentiment.

With Valeria, it could honestly go either way.

The bigger question was whether she actually *knew*.

Whether she realized I wasn't Sera—at least, not the old one.

Not her daughter in *any* sense of the word.

She was too sharp, too observant, for me to rule it out entirely. And given her grasp of Anima—far more intricate than I'd ever suspected—it wasn't impossible that she'd noticed something off.

That she'd sensed something in me that didn't quite fit.

Still, there were limits.

The way she'd talked about my "injuries" made me think she wasn't aware of the *Rest Function*, at least not yet. That was something. If she had known, she wouldn't have told me to rest or recover like that. And the fact that she'd stationed guards and handled my schedule herself meant she clearly still thought in normal biological terms.

I tried to remember if I'd ever leveled up, accepted a Perk, or triggered any major [System] notifications in her presence, but nothing came to mind.

That was... reassuring.

As unlikely as it was that she had Anima Sight active all the time, I wasn't about to rely on that assumption. If the activation of a Perk or Level-Up flooded the air with Anima Sprites—something that even a half-trained practitioner could probably sense—I didn't want to find out the hard way.

'So... I think I'm still in the clear with her on the whole System thing,' I thought finally, exhaling a long, uneven breath.

Whether she knew I wasn't Sera, though—that was another matter entirely.

She'd just called me her *new* daughter.

Maybe that was her way of saying she'd accepted the loss of her real one.

Maybe it was resignation.

Or maybe it was a line drawn in quiet acknowledgment—that the old Sera was gone, and I was what was left.

In the end, I wasn't sure if it mattered.

If she had truly accepted me as Seraphine—this new, warped reflection of who her daughter used to be—then there was no sense in dwelling on what she knew or didn't.

Whatever relationship we had now, whatever this fragile truce between us was, it had been forged through truth, blood, and the kind of honesty that only came after both sides had been broken open.

Either way, I had time to think.

I wasn't allowed to leave the apartment for the day, which meant I could breathe, maybe even plan, for the first time in what might have been weeks.

I still had a [General Perk Point] and a [General Skill Point] waiting to be used as well.

So maybe, for once, being forced to sit still wasn't the worst thing in the world...