

## **Chapter 206 - Texture**

I stood there for a long moment after the door sealed, frozen, trying to untangle the various emotions currently waging a low-grade war inside my chest.

Because being praised by Valeria—unambiguously like that, *twice* in a single conversation—was doing something genuinely strange to me.

On one level, it sent an actual chill down my spine.

It felt utterly *unnatural*. Creepy, almost, as it so heavily deviated hard from an established pattern.

This was the woman who had, not so long ago, poisoned me with neurotoxin as a *lesson*. And even in hindsight, even with a fuller understanding of *why* she'd done it, that fact still sat between us like a wall—a permanent blocker preventing me from taking *anything* positive she offered fully at face value.

The same woman whose approval had, for most of my time in this body, been something measured out in the *absence* of overt *disapproval* rather than in actual, spoken praise.

Having her sit across from me and straight up tell me I'd done well, that I should reach out again, that she'd reward me fairly—it scrambled something in my threat-assessment instincts.

Part of me, quite honestly, kept waiting for the catch—the other shoe to drop, the hidden knife to be revealed. But underneath *that*—deeper down still, in a place I was genuinely loath to even admit existed—the praise had also sent a small, *traitorous* warmth curling into my chest.

*'I don't need her approval.'*

The firm thought immediately surfaced, the way it always did. And it was *true*, factually.

I was a nearly-thirty-year-old woman wearing her teenage daughter's body like a suit.

I did *not* need the validation of a corporate executive who happened to be my fabricated mother. I had managed to build my own competence, made my own way, survived things that would have broken most people in this world already.

And yet...

My subconscious was very clearly sending signals that contradicted the confident declaration. That small warmth hadn't gone anywhere, despite my best efforts.

If anything, it had settled in more comfortably the longer I stood there examining it.

*'Nope. Not fucking doing that. Not today.'*

I was thoroughly unwilling to engage with *that* particular tangle right now—the messy, complicated question of what Valeria's approval *actually* meant to me, and why, and what it said about how much of "Sera" had quietly become genuinely *me* over these weeks.

That was a rabbit hole with no bottom, and I had places to be—*anywhere* but here.

So I shoved it aside and redirected toward the safer, more logical portion of what had just happened: The rational read on the situation.

Which was that—for once—I might have *actually* done the right thing on the first try.

*'Handing the shard to Valeria was absolutely the correct play.'*

Whether I ended up getting anything concrete out of it—Credits, resources, actionable rewards, beyond the [Netrunning] sanitization shard she'd already committed to, which was going to be useful regardless of everything else—would depend entirely on Valeria's verification process and whatever she personally gained from it.

That variable was out of my hands now, and I found I was genuinely fine with that.

Because given what was actually *on* that shard...

*'I'm more than happy with the trade. I would rather lose out on some potential rewards than have something like this get quietly swept under the rug... Some things matter more than the payout.'*

And that thought was the one I chose to stand on. It was a simple, uncomplicated one.

I shook my head hard, then gave both my cheeks a brisk slap with my palms, physically jolting my body out of whatever haywire emotional state it had worked itself into from all the mixed signals of the last half hour.

The sting helped and my focus returned.

*'Right. Enough of all that.'*

I straightened Ela's gear, did a quick check that everything was in place, and headed back out the door—bound once more for Misha's Emporium.

To share the good news, let her know the shard was handled, safely off both our hands, on its way to somewhere it could actually matter. *And*, of course, to become a willing test subject for whatever culinary experiment she'd been threatening me with all day.

*'Can't forget the snacks,'* I thought, the corner of my mouth tugging upward despite everything. *'Never forget the snacks.'*

—

The "cookie"—and I was already fairly certain that word was doing a *tremendous* amount of heavy lifting—crumbled into what could only be described as pure dust the instant it made contact with my teeth.

The entire structural integrity of the thing collapsed on impact, coating the inside of my mouth in a fine, arid powder that immediately began wicking away every trace of moisture I had.

That was, in retrospect, the *good* part of this whole culinary experience.

Because then I started chewing, and discovered the *knobs*.

Small, scattered pockets of something *gummy*—soft, yielding and horrifyingly *resistant*, each one containing some kind of hard, crunchy core that gave way with a distinct, audible snap somewhere between my molars.

Gummy on the outside, crunchy in the middle, all somehow suspended in dust.

That was the entirety of the experience.

Misha's big ruby-crystal eyes were locked onto my face, all four of them, watching with the rapt intensity of a scientist observing a critical experiment.

*'Do not react. Do **not** react. She is **right there**.'*

I have never done well with surprise textures in food.

It's a genuine, longstanding issue that predates this entire world—one of the few personality traits that had apparently survived the memory wipe fully intact. And *crunchy gummy dust* was, without question, the single most *horrifying* texture combination I had ever encountered in either life.

But there was no version of this where I let Misha see that.

So I clamped down on every muscle in my face and body with [Elemental Balance], holding my expression at a perfectly neutral, thoughtful middleground, and kept chewing.

Each bite was its own small ordeal.

My internal monologue devolved almost immediately into a frantic guessing game—'*what is that, what was that one, why did that one make that noise, is that supposed to be there?!*'—while my gag reflex made repeated, increasingly urgent attempts to assert itself and got shut down each time by sheer muscular *willpower*, as well as a healthy dose of System bullshit, of course.

After roughly four bites, I gave up on the process entirely and simply forced myself to *swallow* the whole amalgam of dust, gummy and mystery-crunch, feeling several of the harder fragments scrape their way down my throat with genuine, physical protest.

Then, slowly, I released my muscles and gave Misha my very best "*I am thinking extremely hard about this*" face, complete with a slow, considered nod—the universal signal, I hoped, for "*not hating it, simply processing complex flavors*."

I still had the remaining half of the cookie in my hand.

I could not, under any circumstances, bring myself to eat the rest of it.

Dipping into [Negotiation] and [Deception] simultaneously, I went with the most diplomatic framing my brain could construct on short notice.

"Ela thinks that it is definitely a *unique* experience," I said carefully. "But Ela would like to understand what Misha is actually trying to achieve with them, before giving a full verdict. Does Misha want customers to experience something novel and memorable? Or does Misha want customers to *enjoy* them and come back wanting more? Or is Misha aiming for something else entirely?"

Because those were, quite frankly, *very* different goals.

And if the goal was *memorable*, then honestly, mission fucking accomplished—I was going to be thinking about that texture for probably my entire life, probably during my most vulnerable moments.

But if the goal was *repeat business*... We had *significantly* more work to do.

*'There has to be a way to steer her toward more traditional snack architecture,'* I thought, keeping my expression pleasantly inquisitive while the aftertaste continued its slow campaign against my will to live. *'Something with a single, consistent texture... **One** texture, Misha. Just the one. That's all I'm asking for... Maybe a few chocolate pieces or something. That would be fine too.'*

Misha's entire face lit up at my question.

"*Excellent* question! Misha is so glad friend Ela asks the right questions!"

She hopped down off her stool with a bounce that had genuine spring in it, spinning to face me fully, her hands gesturing wildly as she launched into what was very obviously a *prepared* speech she had apparently just been waiting for an excuse to deliver.

"Misha's goal is twofold. *Twofold*, Ela! Both parts working together, like precision-machined gears!" She held up one claw. "Part one: The customer must *enjoy* the snack. This is obvious. A snack that is not enjoyed is not a snack, it is a punishment, and Misha does not run a punishment establishment... *Yet*. Misha has heard there are good Credits in it, but has not figured out a viable business model so far. A work in progress, really."

A second claw came up.

"But part two! Part two is where Misha is *clever*. The customer must, some hours later—perhaps the next day, perhaps two days—notice *something*. A subtle something. They lift a crate they could not lift before. They climb three flights without complaint. Their arms feel *good*. And they think to themselves: *'Hm! Something has changed. What have I done differently?'*"

I raised an eyebrow at that phrasing.

'She even included the "I" in the presentation...? She's been thinking about this for a long time, huh?'

Misha, meanwhile, spread her arms wide triumphantly.

"And they will conclude—wrongly, but *usefully*—that it must be the *shopping*! The atmosphere! The high quality of Misha's merchandise! And so they return! Again and again, chasing the feeling! And never once do they suspect—" she jabbed a claw at the half-cookie still in my hand, "—the *snack*. The humble snack, sitting in the bowl by the counter, free of charge, doing the work in silence."

'Oh no,' I thought, with rising dread. 'Oh, she's **proud** of this. This is a whole scheme...!'

"Come, come, Misha will *show* Ela!"

And before I could formulate any kind of response, she'd grabbed my wrist and towed me through the back of the store, past the workbenches, and into the actual living space of the Emporium—into the same room where, only a few weeks ago, a Ripper had cut me open on a table to put my insides back where they belonged after the whole Valir situation.

The kitchen was... a *catastrophe*, to put it frankly.

Every horizontal surface had been claimed. Mixing bowls stacked three deep in the sink, at least six different measuring implements scattered across the counter, powder residue in four distinct colors dusting basically everything, and an entire *wall* of ingredient containers with their lids off, arranged in no discernible order whatsoever. Something had, at some point, been spilled and then partially wiped up and then apparently forgotten about.

"Behold!" Misha announced, sweeping an arm across the disaster like a general presenting a battlefield. "Misha's culinary laboratory!"

She began working her way down the counter, holding up containers one after another with the enthusiasm of a proud parent showing off their children's school portraits.

"Isolated industrial protein concentrate—very pure, quite expensive, but Misha does not skimp for the customers! Sixty-two grams per cookie, Ela. *Sixty-two*!"

She moved to the next container.

"Mineral blend, full-spectrum. For the bones! Everyone forgets the bones, but Misha will not!"

Then the next.

"Micro-dosed anabolic compound—perfectly legal, Misha assures—for the *strength* portion of the plan. This is the *workhorse* of the recipe."

Next.

"Slow-release stimulant, so the customer feels alert rather than heavy. Balance is very important, Misha realized after previous attempts. Snacks that make the customer sleepy are not conducive to business. Not at all."

She shook her head slowly.

*'That's... Steroids. She put fucking **steroids** in the free counter cookies.'*

I opened my mouth, having no idea what was going to come out of it but reasonably confident that it needed to include the words "*this is a terrible plan*" somewhere in the sequence—because there were, at absolute minimum, six or seven separate catastrophic problems with what she was describing, ranging from "*dosing strangers without their knowledge*" to "*general liability*" to "*what happens when a customer has a medical condition*"—

But Misha had already stopped in front of a tank.

A large tank, sitting on the far counter, filled with a liquid that was very decidedly not water.

I knew it wasn't water because the *smell* hit me from two meters away the moment she reached for the lid—thick, sour, faintly organic, like something fermenting that had never been intended to be fermented.

"And *this*," she said, with hushed reverence, "is Misha's secret ingredient."

She opened the lid.

"Sump-Bug larvae!"

I looked into the tank—then *immediately* wished I hadn't.

Floating in the cloudy liquid were hundreds, if not thousands of them—pale, segmented, curled inward on themselves in a way that made the word that surfaced in my brain not *larvae* but *embryos*.

Small, soft, pearlescent little commas suspended in murk. And they were still moving.

"*Delectably* crunchy," Misha said dreamily. "They provide the special *texture*, Ela. The little snap. The *surprise*."

The little snap.

*'The little snap...'*

**'THE LITTLE SNAP?!'**

I flipped my Ego switch so fast it was practically a reflex, because I knew—with total, *immediate* certainty—that I did not have the raw mental fortitude to get through this moment under my own power.

I gave it exactly one, instinctive command.

**'Don't let me vomit.'**

My entire body clamped down at once.

Every muscle in my torso locked simultaneously, my throat sealed, my diaphragm went rigid—and my stomach, in open rebellion, made a *violent* and thoroughly sincere attempt to turn itself completely inside out and was physically prevented from doing so by the sudden intervention of my own musculature courtesy of [Elemental Balance].

My eyes widened fractionally.

That was the only thing that got through.

*'She fed me insect embryos... She fed me insect embryos and I chewed them! **That** was the gummy and the crunch! Oh god... Oh fuck... I am going to die. I am actually, **genuinely** going to die and my last meal will have been a fucking **larvae**—'*

Outwardly, however, my Ego was apparently doing an admirable job, because Misha didn't so much as pause.

"—and they are farmed, of course, *very* clean, Misha does not use *wild* sump-bug, Misha is not a barbarian," she continued brightly, replacing the lid and moving right along down the counter. "Now, *here*—dried fruit powder, for sweetness. Misha thought about artificial honey but it made things sticky and sticky is *very* bad for the fingers when handling merchandise. And *here*, a binding agent, which Misha admits still needs work, because the cookies do fall apart somewhat—"

**'Somewhat, she says,'** my brain somewhat repeated, still in the process of freaking out.

"—and *here*, salt derivative, for electrolytes. Which is a *good* addition, Misha thinks. Very sensible, yes."

The rest of the ingredients were, mercifully, nowhere near as horrific. They were all things that came from plants and had never been alive in a way that involved *curling*.

I stood very still then, breathing carefully through my nose, and let the Ego hold the line while my brain slowly, gradually came down off the ceiling.

*'Okay... Okay. We are alive. We are not vomiting. We are going to survive this... somehow.'*

From somewhere in the wreckage of my composure, an actually useful thought surfaced as well, *'... She has no idea, does she? She genuinely, sincerely believes she is doing something somewhat kind here... She spent her own Credits on high-end, isolated protein and full-spectrum minerals to secretly make her customers stronger, because she wanted them to be happy and to come back.'*

I looked at Misha—four eyes bright, ear tufts perked, entirely delighted to be showing this to someone who cared enough to ask—and felt the horror at all earlier revelations recede just slightly, elbowed aside by something considerably warmer and significantly more exasperated.

*'Right,' I thought, releasing my jaw by careful degrees, still feeling the increased saliva pool in my mouth. 'Okay, then... New objective. We are going to fix this—gently. Without breaking her heart in the process. But it **definitely** needs fixing. These cookies will not be part of the plan. We'll make new ones.'*

Before I opened my mouth, though, I did a quick internal inventory check—dipping into my [Cooking] knowledge to see what I actually had to work with here.

The Skill sat at Level 3, built up mostly through my shifts at Mr. Shori's—broth work, prep technique, timing, seasoning fundamentals, all the good stuff. But ramen-stall work was savory, kitchen-line *cooking*, and what I needed right now was something else entirely.

*'Please tell me you cover baking. Please tell me the System didn't skip the entire pastry section—'*

It *did* cover baking, I quickly realized.

As I probed at the knowledge, whole frameworks I'd never once had reason to touch surfaced readily—dough hydration ratios, fat-to-flour structures, binding behavior, leavening chemistry, the specific role of moisture content in crumb texture... The list went on and on.

I suddenly understood, with immediate clarity, exactly *why* Misha's cookie had disintegrated into dust on contact: No binding fat worth mentioning, catastrophically over-dried, and her protein concentrate had been *fighting* the “flour” structure—if one could even call it that—the entire way through the bake.

The knowledge was all *there*, just waiting, like a section of a library I'd owned for weeks and never walked into. And then there was the other thing, of course.

[Resourceful Chef].

The Perk I'd picked up *ages* ago and had never once had a genuine opportunity to use—because using it at Mr. Shori's meant improvising outside his established recipes, in his kitchen, with his ingredients, and potentially causing issues for a man whose entire livelihood ran on consistency.

So it had just sat there in my Perk list, dormant and waiting for a reason to be used.

I looked around the catastrophic kitchen. At the protein isolate, the many mineral blends, the various fruit powders, the salt derivative... At the tank.

*'...Huh,' I thought slowly, as the pieces started assembling themselves into something that resembled—against all odds—an *actual* plan that might end up working. 'With [Cooking] handling the fundamentals and [Resourceful Chef] optimizing and upgrading the ingredients... we might genuinely be able to make something good here. Like, **actually** good. Protein-dense, functional, and—critically—**enjoyable** by beings with human taste buds and texture standards.'*

If—and this was the significant *if*—I could navigate the next five minutes without trampling Misha's pride in the process.



"Misha," I said, and my voice came out almost entirely normal, which I considered the single greatest achievement of my entire life, at this particular moment. "Ela has some thoughts..."