

Chapter 139 - Image

The girl in the mirror didn't look anything like the version of me that still lived in my head.

'*She's gorgeous...!*' That was the first thought that bubbled up—unfiltered and instinctive.

But even as it formed, my brain lagged behind, refusing to bridge the gap between the reflection and my self-image.

And honestly? I couldn't really blame it.

After spending the better part of almost three decades feeling like a loveless, awkward husk of a woman—someone who'd mastered the art of being invisible—it was no wonder my brain short-circuited when faced with this.

With her.

With... *me*.

Gabriel and I had spent the last twenty minutes cleaning ourselves up, dusting off the fancy outfits we each owned solely for these kinds of corpo-heavy family dinners. I'd even gone through one of Sera's drawers and found some light makeup tucked away, barely used.

I wasn't exactly good at it, in my mind, but I did have plenty of experience.

In my past life, I'd thrown money at beauty tutorials, practiced my way through several dozen product lines, and desperately tried to make magic out of discount palettes—each attempt a quiet war against a face I never liked.

Like trying to put lipstick on a literal pig.

But with Sera's face? It felt like a completely different game.

Like I was just adding final touches to an already-finished painting: Highlighting the right spots, smoothing over a few barely-there blemishes, giving just the lightest accent to lips that didn't need reshaping, eyes that already drew focus in just the right way.

'*I put this makeup on,*' I reminded myself, trying to align my self-image with the person staring back at me through the mirror. '*That's **my** reflection.*'

But no matter how hard I tried, it still felt completely disconnected.

The girl—no, *woman*—in the mirror looked like she belonged in a damn commercial.

Draped in that sleek cerulean evening gown—tight around the waist, with a flowing cut that emphasized every bit of curvature and movement—it was hard not to stare. Even the subtle shimmer of the fabric caught the low light of the room in a way that made her glow slightly.

That / glowed, technically.

The makeup I had applied was soft, but deliberate.

A light foundation just enough to smooth out the already flawless skin, paired with a bit of highlighter brushed over the cheekbones and the bridge of the nose, making everything pop in that natural, *I-woke-up-like-this* kind of way.

A gentle sweep of rose-gold on the lids, a fine flick of eyeliner, and mascara that pulled just enough attention to her—*my*—eyes. And the lips... just a subtle gloss with a hint of color, enough to be kissable without trying too hard.

'What the hell, System?! This is absolutely fucking illegal... If I had looked like this at 17, almost 18...' I decided not to finish that train of thought.

The body I was walking around in now? Insane. There was no other word for it.

Slim, but toned waist, sculpted legs, toned, semi-muscular arms that could probably throw someone twice my weight over a table, and just enough softness in all the right places to make it dangerously unfair.

I would've killed for even ten percent of this back in my old life.

Hell, I'd *tried*—diet, exercise, makeup, wardrobe tricks.

None of it had ever given me the results I had been looking for, much less came even close to all of *this*.

And it wasn't even static, either. My Body Attribute was 5 now.

The System had been subtly reshaping me over time—more muscle mass in the legs and shoulders, more definition, a tighter core.

But it was nowhere finished yet.

Attributes went up to 10 by default, more via unlocks that allowed my body to sustain more changes—Cybernetics, Bionics, Genetics.

The dress, which had fit comfortably just a few weeks ago, had taken an actual *battle* to get into this time. I was definitely going to have to ask Valeria for something new before long, unless I wanted the beautiful dress to pop at the seams next time I had to look fancy.

Still, there was one thing that hadn't changed too much since the last dinner—my chest.

While definitely slightly enhanced since then and looking thoroughly *dangerous* in this particular dress, it was modest.

Manageable.

Which honestly gave me more mental peace than I would ever care to admit.

Back in my old body, *that* had been the bane of my existence. Gravity had been a cruel, cruel mistress. But here? Everything was just... balanced.

Maybe, *maybe*, I could even have handled my old body's proportions with this kind of muscle tone across my back and core, but I was very glad that I wouldn't have to figure it out anytime soon—hopefully never.

"Looking great, Sera," Gabriel's voice cut through my haze, warm and teasing.

My head snapped up, eyes locking onto his in the mirror.

He was standing just outside the doorway, leaning slightly against the frame with that familiar half-smirk tugging at his lips.

It was the kind of smile that said *caught ya staring*, but also something softer underneath—something proud. A quiet kind of relief that I was standing there at all, looking healthy, whole, and confident enough to lose myself in the mirror for a minute.

'*Damn it, Gabe... learn to hide your feelings better,*' I thought, watching his face like a display panel with too many status indicators. Pride, sympathy, amusement—he wore them all at once, layered like the Rainbow Welcome I had drunk just earlier today.

I cleared my throat and fought back the flush rising in my cheeks, casually adjusting the edge of my gown like I hadn't just been gawking at myself like an idiot.

"Likewise," I said, turning around and letting my eyes sweep over him for a second—and no lie needed there.

Gabriel had cleaned up *well*.

Hair tied back for once instead of styled into chaotic spikes, as well as temporarily dyed black with the usual nano-dye treatment he always put on for these occasions, button-down shirt, similarly crisp matte black as his hair, tucked neatly into matching slacks.

His old tuxedo, the one he had worn that first family dinner, had been retired at Valeria's "request", as he had outgrown it.

But the new outfit looked great on him.

He looked older, far more mature than usual. Still exhausted underneath it all, no doubt, but like someone ready to walk into a room and pretend everything was fine—corpo polished and family-dinner certified.

"Damn, Gabe," I added with a lazy grin. "Didn't know you owned real clothes."

"Right back at you," he shot back, smirk lingering just long enough to let me know he appreciated the compliment.

Then, with a mock-formal tilt of his head, he offered me his arm. "Shall we?"

Valeria and Oliver had come back while we were still getting ready—quiet footsteps, low conversation, the usual dance of two corpos returning from whatever battlefield their boardrooms had been that day.

Oliver had poked his head in a little earlier to let us know dinner was officially *on*, as expected.

Which meant—somehow—everything had actually lined up.

Our timing, our outfits, our mental prep. Whether that was fate or just Gabe carefully watching the clock during our earlier soul-dump, I couldn't say.

I crossed the room and slipped my arm into his, leaving the reflection behind in the mirror—leaving the gorgeous, young woman and all her carefully-applied confidence standing there, watching me go.

"Let's," I said with a small nod, linking up with him like I was some kind of socialite and not a freshly-minted Operator who'd just been stepping through Scav-guts a few hours ago.

We were a united front now, Gabe and I.

Our goals weren't the same, not really—but they pointed in the same general direction. And to get what we each wanted? We'd have to pull off a flawless tag-team performance against the final boss of the tutorial: Valeria. Our mother.

CEO of impossible standards and all-time world champion of passive-aggressive dinner conversation and poisoning her own children with neurotoxins.

'Time to roll initiative, I guess...'

Taking a final steadying breath—one that Gabe seemed to echo right beside me—we stepped out of our room and walked the few short steps through the living room, standing side-by-side as we turned towards the kitchen table.

Oliver was there, already waiting, perfectly at ease in his ever-presentable tailored grey suit that he wore for these dinners, looking like he'd just stepped off a corporate billboard.

Next to him sat the woman in question, Valeria, clad in her pitch-black gown dotted with tiny star-like specks, a garment that managed to somehow look more like high-society armor than fabric. It shimmered subtly under the room's gentle lights, sharp edges of cloth draping around her like a regal cloak—elegance and intimidation stitched seamlessly together.

Oliver's face immediately brightened when he saw us, breaking the quiet tension hanging in the room. "Wow, you two look amazing!"

He shot us both an encouraging grin, then nudged Valeria gently. "Don't they look amazing, Val?"

Valeria didn't respond right away.

Instead, she slowly lifted her piercing steel-grey eyes, scanning us up and down with clinical precision. Every strand of hair, every fold of fabric—nothing escaped her meticulous inspection.

Gabe and I stood awkwardly frozen, almost holding our breath, waiting for her judgement.

Finally, a tiny, nearly invisible smile twitched at the corner of her lips. “They do look positively presentable indeed, dearest.”

I had to fight down the instinct to react visibly to that—around Valeria, muscle control was key. But internally? My mind was spinning.

*‘Holy shit, **positively presentable?***’ In Valeria-speak, that basically meant we’d knocked it clean out of the park.

I could feel a strange warmth spreading in my chest, excitement bubbling up like a middle-schooler getting complimented by her crush for the first time. Sure, maybe it was a little embarrassing, but I hadn’t exactly had an abundance of genuine praise to work with before now.

Let alone from someone like Valeria, who, in her own right, would be considered a top-tier super model in my past life without a doubt—especially dolled up for the family dinners like she was now.

She tilted her head slightly, eyes flicking between us with that same distant calculation she always wore, and then—without even a twitch of effort—took control of the entire evening.

“Sit, children,” she said.

No raised voice, no emphasis.

Just a perfectly level command dressed in the vague costume of an invitation.

Gabriel and I moved without hesitation, wordlessly slipping into our usual seats at the table.

The clink of polished silver cutlery—the kind I never saw anywhere in the apartment except on family dinner nights, like it just spawned in from some secret dimension—mixed with the soft rustle of fabric were the only sounds for a beat, as Valeria sat back with that perfect, spine-straight posture of hers, letting the silence hang just long enough to make it clear who was in charge—as if anybody could forget—before she spoke again.

“I must admit, I am pleasantly surprised that we are all gathered tonight,” she began, her voice calm and cool, corporate to the very core. “It is not often the entire family aligns their schedules so conveniently, for a third time in a row.”

There was a hint of something there—something sharper buried under her words.

Maybe a jab at past-Sera’s infamous evasions of those exact evenings, maybe nothing.

Hard to tell with Valeria.

Everything she said was wrapped in so many layers of careful intention and bullshit that trying to read between them felt like wandering a minefield blindfolded.

“Regardless, the past few weeks have been *unusually* trying on all of us,” she continued, folding her hands with that serene, practiced motion. “I am pleased that we can take this brief moment to be together as a family. Such moments grow increasingly rare in a world like ours, I am afraid.”

The air around the table felt a little heavier now, like even the lighting had dimmed slightly to match the weight of her words.

Then came the shift.

She turned to Oliver, and just like that, the icy elegance evaporated, like it had never existed.

“And how was your day, dearest?” she asked, her voice suddenly laced with warmth so artificial it almost sounded cartoonish. “I hope your meetings were not too dreadful, dear.”

The sweet, syrupy tone sent an immediate shiver crawling right down my spine.

Every time she spoke to him like that, I could practically hear reality cracking and creaking just a little; like watching a mannequin suddenly come to life and smile.

And yet... Oliver just smiled back like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“It was alright, Val,” he replied with a slight sigh, as if the shift didn’t even register. “Nothing particularly exciting today. But then again, that’s a blessing lately, isn’t it? The whole OriginTech issue has been... *trying*, as you like to put it.”

Valeria chuckled—light and elegant, like the sound had been pre-recorded.

I sat still, lips sealed, doing my best not to flinch.

Watching her switch gears like that, from iron command to sugar-dipped sweetness, always threw me off. It was like witnessing a machine change personalities mid-sentence. I didn’t know if Oliver was just used to it... or if he genuinely didn’t notice at all.

Either option was its own brand of unsettling.

“We’re working through it, slowly but surely... but Headquarters isn’t exactly thrilled with how long it’s taking,” Oliver said, a tired note creeping into his voice.

“I’m not either, obviously, but there’s not much I can personally do about it. The Net Specialists are doing what they can—trying to backtrace the breach and patch whatever holes got exploited in the first place, but...”

He paused with a sigh, lifting his hands in a helpless shrug. “This sort of thing really isn’t my area. It’s just... *slow*.”

He exhaled again, then added with a faint smile, “On the plus side, the endless meetings about the incident have finally started dying down. Feels like they’ve squeezed us dry for all the info they think we have.”

"Of course, dear. You're doing everything that can be expected, and more. The incompetence lies not with you, but with the delays of the specialists. Don't trouble yourself over what isn't your burden to fix," Valeria cooed, her hand briefly brushing his in a gesture that might have seemed romantic to someone who hadn't suffered at her hands.

Then she turned her head and the shift was instant.

That same hand returned to her lap, perfectly folded, and her smile vanished like it had never been there at all. When her eyes landed on Gabriel, the temperature in the room dropped like someone had opened a door to the Arctic.

"Gabriel," she said, cool and crisp. "It has come to my attention that I have received precious little information about your progress over the past few weeks. My work has been particularly demanding as of late, and as such, I have not had the time to review the usual reports. So," she said, lifting her chin just slightly, "you will provide me with a proper update now."

Her words hit like icewater to the face.

Like there was no scenario where Gabriel would not answer, and no version of that answer that would not be judged to the decimal.

I kept my own face still, the same neutral expression I'd worn for most of the dinner, but inside my thoughts spun hard at what she had just said.

"Usual reports"?

Was that something Gabriel had been sending her directly? Weekly progress check-ins like some kind of internal evaluation? Or... was it something else?

'Is she paying someone for information... A sort of private detective or something? If she's doing that for Gabriel, there's no shot she doesn't have one for me as well...'

Did she have somebody like that? If so, how much did she know? What had she seen?

I held my posture, didn't flinch, didn't twitch, didn't even blink.

But somewhere in my gut, the coils of paranoia twisted a little tighter—sickeningly familiar, like a reflex I couldn't shake. And *that*, more than anything, made me want to scream.

Because it felt like *this* was exactly the kind of reaction Valeria wanted: That quiet, creeping uncertainty. The doubt. The sense of being watched, prodded, controlled.

And there I was, dancing to her tune all over again.

Gabriel cleared his throat, sitting up a bit straighter as he visibly gathered his thoughts, trying to put them into just the right words for Valeria's standards.

"As for my... professional progress, I recently had a, uh—performance evaluation at work, as per our last dinner's discussion," he started carefully, clearly searching for the proper terminology as he spoke.

“My supervisors decided that my efforts warranted a... Promotion to a more client-facing role. I’ve been responsible for direct customer interactions, overseeing transaction processes and ensuring that their, um—experience aligns with the company’s standards, for quite a while now and it’s been... Challenging.”

He shifted slightly, obviously uncomfortable but determined to press on.

“I’ve also been continuing my... personal development through the Arkion Dojo sessions you have so graciously provided, Mum. Admittedly, the extra workload from covering additional shifts to make up for my missed hours during my injury, has made consistent improvements a bit more... behind schedule as I would have wanted. But I have already devised counter-measures for this issue. Sera’s offered to help me catch up and bridge some of the... gaps in my personal development in this regard.”

Valeria’s eyes flickered briefly toward me at the mention.

I simply stared at her, giving a simple nod to show my support for Gabriel’s claims.

“As for my... personal life,” Gabriel hesitated again, searching for the right phrasing, “it’s definitely been *impacted* by the current schedule, no doubt. But I’m confident that once the extra shifts are finished, I’ll be able to better balance things again, both personally and professionally.”

His speech wasn’t smooth, definitely not polished enough to match Valeria’s standards, but it was close. Close enough that, apparently, despite a brief pause as she considered his words, he avoided her usual cold corrections.

Instead, she simply offered a small, almost approving nod.

She folded her hands neatly on the table, her expression unreadable—but the way her head tilted ever so slightly told me she was already dissecting everything Gabriel had said.

“I remember,” Valeria said, voice smooth as black glass. “The transition to a role with increased client interaction. That was indeed a notable shift in trajectory, Gabriel.”

Her tone wasn’t warm, but it wasn’t cutting either. More like she was weighing something.

“However...” she continued, eyes narrowing just slightly, “you mentioned the adjustment has presented certain “*challenges*”, as you have called them. A curious choice of wording, I must admit, given that you rarely speak about your personal feelings on such matters openly in this setting.”

The room chilled ever so slightly, the silence growing heavier as she let the implication hang in the air.

“There *is* something more to this, and you wish to talk about it, is there not?”

Her words weren’t an accusation. Not quite. But there was a definite sense that she’d just pried the lid off the box and was waiting for Gabriel to admit what was inside.

I felt my stomach tighten in silent sympathy, watching the tension rise in Gabriel's shoulders.

This was it—the opening move, exactly how he'd planned it. The way he'd hoped to ease into the referral request without appearing *too* desperate.

'*Good luck, Gabe,*' I thought, keeping my expression perfectly still as I braced for impact.

Gabriel took in a slow breath, straightened his back just a little more, and placed his hands neatly in front of him on the table—clearly rehearsed, clearly nervous.

But when he spoke, his voice held a quiet conviction beneath the surface hesitation.

"Following recent developments in both my professional and personal circumstances, I've taken time to reflect on my current t... trajectory." He stumbled slightly on *trajectory*, like he wasn't entirely sure if he was using it right, but powered through regardless. "While I've been thankful for the opportunities my current employer has provided, I've come to recognize a growing misalignment between the role's long-term potential and the goals I believe I need to pursue for myself... And for our family as a whole."

He glanced up briefly, just long enough to meet Valeria's gaze, but then dropped his eyes again immediately, unable to sustain the direct contact.

"The attack... ehh the incident, I mean—it changed a lot for me. I... I realize now, just how vulnerable I can be out there. And not just physically, but in terms of opportunity. Stability. Direction."

His hands curled slightly, just for a second, before flattening again.

"I've always tried to find my own way forward, outside the family's shadow... But with everything that's happened—and after seeing how quickly things can spiral—I've started to believe that pursuing an internal position within a more structured corporate entity would offer the kind of long-term security and growth I can't seem to find where I am now."

Then came the part he clearly dreaded.

He swallowed, sat a little straighter, and forced himself to meet both Valeria's and Oliver's eyes—Oliver's carrying clear surprise, like he'd been completely blindsided by the request.

"And so... Mum, Dad... I'd like to formally request a referral. Either to EtherLabs or Rainmar Logistics—or maybe FluxGear itself—if such a thing would be possible. I understand I may need to go through preliminary aptitude assessments or corporate onboarding evaluations. I'm more than willing to engage with those processes and prove myself worthy of the referral."

He took a breath.

"I just... I'd rather be somewhere where I *know* I won't be alone if something goes wrong again. Somewhere with structure. With systems. I think I need that..."

His words hung there for a moment.

Not desperate, not begging—just honest and vulnerable.

And quietly heavy.

I nudged his knee lightly under the table with mine—just a small gesture to let him know I was with him, and that he'd done good.

*'Really good, actually, considering we'd only decided on this route, what... an hour or two ago? I guess he really **has** been thinking about this for a while, huh...?' The thought hit harder than I expected. 'I'm sorry, Gabe. For not noticing sooner. For not being there earlier...'*

Oliver's brows furrowed the second Gabriel finished.

He blinked once.

Then again—like his brain was still rebooting from the emotional whiplash.

"I... Gabe, I'm sorry. I didn't realize things were that bad..." His voice was soft, caught between guilt and regret. "I knew the stabbing shook you up—how could it not? But I guess I figured... You'd bounce back, like you always do. Or if not... That I'd at least... notice if you didn't."

He let out a breath, rubbing a hand over his jaw. "But I've been buried in this damn OriginTech fallout, haven't I? That's not an excuse. Just... the truth, really. Doesn't make it right." He glanced across the table, gaze flicking to each of us, before settling back on Gabriel. "I should've checked in more. That's on me. And I'll do better, I swear."

He paused again, then shook his head with a tired smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"If this were any other time, I'd walk you through the front doors myself. No hesitation. But right now?" He grimaced. "Anything with my name on it, especially a referral, is going to do more harm than good, considering that the whole incident happened under my watch—not that I had any way to do anything about it... But that's how it works. The company's extremely on edge—I'm on edge. My badge barely opens half the doors it used to, with how much oversight we're under."

He turned toward Valeria, his tone shifting with a mix of hopeful concession and quiet understanding. "If we want this to work, it's probably better if it comes from you, dear. EtherLabs is steady, if not entirely unaffected, but still—and you've got the pull. He needs a fair shot, not another uphill battle."

The silence that followed Oliver's words wasn't long—but it *felt* long.

Almost infinitely so.

Long enough to set off every warning bell in my head.

Valeria hadn't answered right away.

She didn't turn her head toward Oliver with one of those smooth, graceful acknowledgments. Didn't offer her usual "of course, dear," or some other pre-prepared line laced with the usual sickly, venomous sugar that she reserved only for him.

No, she just... *sat* there.

Eyes fixed on the far end of the table, her expression unreadable.

Not stern, not cold—just *neutral*.

Like she'd suddenly gone completely inward, parsing something we weren't allowed to see.

And that, more than anything, *terrified* me.

Valeria *never* hesitated. Not when speaking, not when judging, not when slicing you to bits with a perfectly worded sentence that left no room for argument.

She always knew exactly what to say and when to say it.

That was the image of her I had in my head, but this woman in front of me right now...?

Her silence dragged on far too long. Completely against every image of her I had.

I felt my stomach twist as my thoughts scrambled to fill the void.

'Isn't this what she had always wanted...? Gabriel is her eldest. Her heir... The one she has been grooming to follow in her perfectly-pressed footsteps. She's been drilling corporate values into him since he could string sentences together, I absolutely guarantee it!' I thought, frantically trying to make sense of any of this.

*'Isn't this literally **the** victory lap for her...? The moment where she finally got to bask in a child choosing the path she'd so carefully curated for him?'*

But if that was true.

If my image of her was actually accurate, and I had read her intentions and actions over the past weeks correctly... Then why did she act so... *confused*?

A part of me still expected to see that tight-lipped, razor-thin smile.

A quiet "good boy" layered between clauses about job placements and expectations.

Maybe a reminder that this referral would come with strings, of course—it *a/ways* did with her.

But instead, I was staring at something I didn't recognize at all.

Something I struggled to make sense of: Valeria... caught off guard?

'No. That can't be right. Can it...?'