

Chapter 143 - Consequentia II

“Now then,” the large armored man’s voice cut in from the kitchen, pulling me out of my desperate, failed attempts to get a message out. “Let’s have a little chat, *Viper*. Long overdue, don’t you think?”

He paused mid-sentence, like something had just occurred to him.

I couldn’t see much—my face was still mashed into the carpet—but I heard the faint creak of his armor as he straightened up.

“You,” he said, voice snapping in another direction—somewhere to my left, “do not, under *any* circumstances, hurt that man. Rough him up if you want, but no lasting harm, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” came the reply from further left.

‘That’s the guy who’s got Oliver, right?’ I tried to shift my head, but the knee digging into my spine sent pain shooting all the way to my fingertips.

Any real movement was out of the question.

The armored man started to turn back toward Valeria, then stopped again, reconsidering.

His voice came sharper this time, aimed at the same agent.

“Listen—I feel like you might have *heard* me say ‘don’t hurt him,’ but I really need you to *understand* me: *Do not*, under any circumstances, harm that man. He’s got PremMed Insurance. You mess this up even slightly, and all your colleagues have died for *nothing* getting us in here. Got it?”

That got my attention.

I managed to angle my head just enough to catch a sliver of Oliver’s face.

The flicker of surprise there was a perfect mirror of my own.

‘/He have/has PremMed?!’

PremMed wasn’t your average top-tier coverage—it was *the* top-tier coverage.

In *Neon Dragons*, it was the medical equivalent of god mode—so broken it wasn’t even available to Players. The devs had been asked about it in multiple interviews and straight-up admitted they had no idea how to balance something that ridiculous, so they’d just locked it out of Player access entirely.

PremMed was built as a fail-safe, an NPC-only buff for special, story-critical characters—basically a way to disincentivize Players from killing them, even by accident, and nuking entire questlines.

Full-spectrum recovery from anything short of total vaporization, cutting-edge biotech, and regeneration tech that made cloning look like a children's toy—all wrapped into one disgustingly overpowered package.

But the *real* benefit people paid for? The field team.

If a PremMed client was injured badly enough to risk more than a day or two of downtime, a retrieval unit would be on-site in minutes. And they weren't just medics—they rolled in with cybernetically enhanced 'Borgs built for heavy combat.

They were combat-ready, fully augmented 'Borgs packing military-grade hardware, the kind of muscle that could go toe-to-toe with fucking *MaxTech*. Not as well-trained, maybe, and not as many, but the fact that they could even be compared was terrifying enough.

How Oliver had gotten himself on *that* list was, hands down, the most impossible part of tonight. And that was saying something, considering everything else I'd seen in the last few minutes. Even Valeria—based on what I'd managed to dig up on her so far—was *nowhere near* the level of influence or wealth needed to get within sniffing distance of PremMed.

"Y... Yes, sir! I understand, sir! No harm will be done!" the agent barked back, sounding almost rattled. I saw the pressure on Oliver's back ease slightly. He immediately tried to twist free, but the knee came back down hard, pinning him again with a thud.

The armored man finally turned his attention back to Valeria. "Now—where were we? Ah, right. Sorry about that. Can't have PremMed waltzing in here and ruining all our fun, yeah?"

Valeria hadn't said a word the whole time.

She just stared him down—cold, silent, and utterly unreadable. And from the look in her eyes, she wasn't planning to break that silence anytime soon.

"You really gotta make this difficult, huh?" he said with a long, almost tired sigh, leaning one hip against what was left of the central kitchen counter. The thing was more rubble than furniture—shattered stone, splintered supports, dust still drifting down from the ceiling above it—but he rested there like it was a perfectly good place to lounge.

"But I guess that's nothing new with you."

He tilted his head, his tone sharpening just slightly. "Two years, *Viper*. Two years I've been chasing you. Every time I thought I had you cornered? You vanished. Over and over. Do you have any idea how many meetings I've sat through, listening to 'colleagues' question my competence because of you?"

Pushing off the counter, he crouched down until he was almost level with her, the thick plates of his armor creaking with the movement. "What happened, *Viper*? I didn't suddenly get better at this. I *know* that. I've burned through every method, every budget increase I could get approved, thousands of man-hours of tracking and surveillance... and I *still* shouldn't be here. I've been running the *same* plays for two years—same angles, same tools, same everything. And yet, somehow, I'm standing here now, looking at you. Why? *Because you stopped*. You let me catch up. And I want to know *why*."

His voice rose, not in volume, but in weight—sharp enough to cut with. “*I don’t understand!*”

Then his fist hit the tile right beside her head.

The floor *exploded* under the impact, shards of ceramic and chunks of rockcrete spraying outward as he left a crater big enough to bury a fist in.

He stayed there for a beat, breathing steady, before his tone settled again. “You know I can’t seriously hurt you. EtherLabs wouldn’t let it slide if we crossed that line.”

The cold edge in his voice came back, sliding under the words like a blade. “But you also know, that I know, that *you* know this. That big brain of yours is already running the math, searching for an angle, figuring the odds... but you can’t help thinking about the big, ugly other half of the equation, can you?”

I had no clue what the hell any of the things he had just said meant.

And stuck here, pinned under a corporate agent’s knees grinding into my spine, I didn’t exactly have the freedom to ask. My best option was to keep listening and—if I got lucky—spot something I could use.

[Narrow Twist] was the most obvious escape trick I had, but with a knee jammed into my back? No chance.

‘[Slippery Body] would’ve been so good right now, fuck.’ I couldn’t help thinking how perfect it would’ve been to have held onto that Perk for a moment like this.

But I knew better. That kind of thinking was a trap.

Even if I did somehow break free—then what? Where was I supposed to run? What was I supposed to *do*? At best, my knives could slip into one of the armor’s neck joints, maybe take down a single guy if I got lucky.

But that was it—one kill, *maybe*—and then I’d be right back here.

Or more likely: Plastered against the floor and wall.

The standoff between Valeria and the armored man was broken by a new voice drifting in from the kitchen breach.

A figure stepped through the jagged opening like they had all the time in the world.

“Twelve minutes, sir,” the newcomer reported, tone clipped and professional. “The active-jam is keeping them contained, and the distractions are working as intended—but I wouldn’t give it more than those twelve minutes, even at the most optimistic estimate.”

The armored man didn’t answer.

He just kept staring down Valeria through that blacked-out visor, his silence heavy enough to press into the air. One gloved hand lifted briefly—a simple, wordless signal of acknowledgment—before dropping back to his side.

The newcomer didn't linger at the breach.

He walked further in, boots crunching over broken tile and debris, until he was standing dead center in what was left of the apartment.

A large datapad rested in his hands, his eyes occasionally flicking between its display and whatever invisible streams of input were feeding directly into his head.

I finally got a clear look at him and the first thought hit instantly: '*Netrunner*.'

He didn't match the rest of the crew. No helmet.

Instead, a full Crown sat on his head—one of the serious ones, high-end, purpose-built.

Thick bundles of wires sprouted from the band like the roots of a metal plant, threading into ports along his neck, vanishing under his armor into whatever rigs he had strapped across his torso.

That Crown was almost certainly what let him single-handedly choke every signal in the apartment—and probably more. The way he moved, the way he kept scanning data mid-step, told me he was juggling more than just us.

If his words were any clue, he wasn't just locking us down. He was probably blanketing the *entire floor*, keeping EtherLabs blind to whatever the hell these "distractions" had caused.

The armored man finally broke the stalemate after a few more moments, straightening to his full height with a sharp, impatient roll of his shoulders. Even through the visor, I could *feel* the annoyance radiating off him at Valeria's continued silence.

"Well," he said, voice turning flat, "unfortunately, I'm on a bit of a time crunch here. Which means the ugly side of the equation's gonna have to come in earlier than I planned—since you don't seem to want to talk."

He took a slow step back, as if to give the words room to sink in, then added almost conversationally, "Still, I guess I should be grateful you stopped running when you did. Let me catch you—and the *whole family*—in one sweep. Real efficient, huh?"

That line sent a cold shiver crawling down my spine and settled a growing terror in my gut.

Because that's when it *clicked*.

Oliver had PremMed. Valeria had whatever shadowy protections EtherLabs extended to someone like her—serious enough that even this guy wouldn't dare cross the line.

But Gabriel and I?

We were the soft spots. The leverage.

If he wanted something out of Valeria, he couldn't touch her.

Not in a way that mattered, not with the time he had.

But us? We were *entirely* fair game.

And the way he'd just said "*entire family*"... it wasn't just a potential threat.

It was the plan.

Valeria's head snapped toward him, eyes narrowing into something razor-sharp.

"You shan't *dare* lay a hand on them," she spat, her voice carrying that cold, controlled rage I'd only ever seen in the most dangerous people.

She'd clearly followed the same thought I had—where this was headed; or probably had already known.

The armored man didn't flinch. "You know why I'm here, *Viper*. You can end all of this right now—just tell me what I want to know. Sure, you'll die—no avoiding that—but I swear, on the Dragon herself, no harm will come to the rest of them."

She tried to wrench free, muscles straining against the two agents holding her.

They locked her arms down tight, armor servos whining under the force she was putting out.

But there was no leverage, no angle to break their grip.

The big man waited, almost patient, giving her a moment to consider—probably banking on her knowing brute force alone wasn't going to work here.

But Valeria just glared back at him, silent.

Finally, he let out a long, irritated sigh.

"Alright," he said, and gestured to two of the idle agents. "Go."

They started moving toward me and Gabriel, boots crunching across the debris-strewn floor.

"I really don't want to hurt kids," the man continued, voice just a shade softer, almost like he meant it. "Not what I signed up for. But... sometimes, it's the only option left."

That's what finally caught Oliver up to the situation.

"Don't you *fucking* touch either of them! I will fucking kill you!" he roared, the words cracking in a way I'd never heard from him before.

Probably the first time I'd ever heard him swear like that at all.

And it was venomous—pure fury packed into every syllable.

The corporate agent on top of his back was struggling to keep him contained, but still managed to.

"You always do love squeezing intel out of our people, don't you, Viper?" the armored man went on, as if Oliver hadn't just shouted at him like he wanted to tear his head off. His tone was almost conversational, but there was a cold, deliberate weight behind every word.

"You've got quite the reputation. Not that I really need to tell you that now, do I?"

He tilted his head slightly, briefly looking back at her as he slowly walked towards me and Gabriel. "Your methods are... revolutionary. I'll give you that. Do you have *any* idea how humiliating it is to have to borrow someone else's playbook for gathering intelligence? No, of course you don't—why would you? But at least we both know just *how well* those methods of yours work..."

His voice dipped into something nastier, more deliberate. "Now... Here's a question I've been wondering."

A small pause, just long enough to make it sting. "Did you ever put your kids through anti-torture training? Surely, *even you* wouldn't go that far... right?"

Gabriel and I had been thrashing uselessly under the weight of the corpo agents pinning us down—ever since that particular line of conversation started, really—but it was like trying to push a building off your back.

If even Valeria couldn't muscle her way out of this, we didn't stand a chance in hell.

The only thing keeping me from spiraling into full-blown panic at the idea of corpo-level torture was my Ego, filtering the fear just enough to keep me thinking straight.

And weirdly, my biggest worry right then wasn't me—it was Gabriel.

'I can probably take it better than he can,' I told myself, running the numbers in my head. *'My Body is comparatively high for my size, plus I have the Rest Function for recovery... I could maybe tank it... All I have to do is hold out for around ten minutes.'*

But Gabriel? Not a chance.

'How the hell do I get this guy to zero in on me instead?' I thought, mind already clawing for something—anything—that would make me the more tempting target for whatever he had in store.

So I just went for it.

"Hey, asshole!" I barked, twisting against the knee in my spine just enough to lift my head a fraction. "You done spewing bullshit at her, or you need me to explain how utterly fucking pathetic you sound while hiding behind a bunch of goons?"

The armored man froze mid-step.

His visor shifted toward me, slow and deliberate, until he was staring straight down like I'd just grown a second head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Valeria's gaze cut to me, sharp enough to sting.

Gabriel, on the other hand, had stopped moving entirely, his confusion and fear written all over his face.

"You fucking heard me, *bitch*," I snapped, pushing harder. "You're not getting a single fucking thing out of her, no matter what! Hiding behind that stupid helmet so nobody can see the tears you're shedding while crying about how she's so much better than you... Absolutely pathetic, blank-tier behavior. Are you worried you'll get embarrassed in front of your own men if they see you cry like that?"

A low chuckle filtered through his helmet, metallic and humorless.

"I was wondering," he said, voice taking on an unsettling calm, "if the Viper's feisty genes would actually propagate. But seeing you like this—pinned, cornered—and still mouthing off?"

He straightened, giving a slow shake of his head. "Yeah. I'm certain now. For all the horrors that's going to drag into the world, really."

Raising his voice, so everyone in the room could clearly hear him, he added, "Let's start with her, then."

The order had barely left his mouth when a sudden scuffle erupted to my left—fast, violent, over in less than a second.

A single gunshot cracked through the air, sharp enough to cut every sound in the room.

"...*Sorry, children.*"

It was Oliver's voice—faint, fragile, stripped of all the force it normally carried.

I strained against the weight on my back, trying to see, but before I could, Valeria's voice came low and dangerous.

"Oliver..."

That one word told me everything I *didn't* want to know.

At the same instant, the Crown-wearing netrunner jerked violently, like he'd just taken a lightning strike to the skull. Blue-white arcs of electricity snapped across the metal lattice on his head, popping and crackling loud enough to sting my ears.

His scream was high and ragged as he clawed at the device, trying to rip it off like it was actively melting into his head, before collapsing to the ground in a heap, still twitching.

The agent who'd been holding Oliver down just stood frozen, staring at the body.

Around Oliver, a perfect black-red flashing holographic square, about two and a half meters on each side, shimmered into place.

The glowing tape pulsed slowly, the words “DO NOT ENTER. PREMMED EN-ROUTE” cycling in dozens of languages for anyone dumb enough not to get the message.

“I didn’t—he—” the agent stammered, voice shaky. “He somehow dislocated his shoulder, grabbed my gun, pulled it right towards him—right to his heart and... I... my finger was on the trigger... I didn’t...”

He swallowed. “He just... did it himself.”

Silence settled over the room like a lead blanket, thick and suffocating.

“How hard can it be *not* to fuck this up after I *explicitly* told you what to watch out for, *huh?*” the armored man snarled, his voice suddenly booming against the walls. “Guess that’s what I get for working with fucking *amateurs!*”

He stomped forward, the impact of his step rattling debris, until he stood over Oliver’s body.

“*Stay* with the fucking body!” he barked at the agent hovering nearby. “*Don’t touch* the tape, or I’ll kill you myself! There’s nothing we can do for you now. Just pray PremMed doesn’t call this a major incident—but with black-red tape? Your odds aren’t looking good, you absolute fucking *blank!*”

He spun on the netrunner, who was still twitching on the floor, trying and failing to get both feet under him. “And what the fuck’s wrong with you?”

The man gasped between words, like each one cost him. “PremMed... signal... punched straight through the jam. Overloaded... everything. Fried the whole system.”

He dragged in a sharp breath through his teeth. “Only the passive-jam’s still active. Four minutes of juice, maybe, before the whole floor reboots.”

His voice cracked as another groan escaped. “Best guess—it might last longer.”

“Fuck!” The armored man spat. He swung his glare back to Valeria. “Didn’t expect your useless fucking man-toy to be the one to throw himself away here. PremMed suicide just to screw us? Did you teach him that as a contingency, you cold-hearted bitch? I knew you were ruthless, but this is fucked up, even for your subterranean standards.”

He didn’t wait for an answer.

Instead, he jabbed a finger toward the two corpo agents who’d been moving toward Gabriel and me earlier. “You and you—prep them both. We don’t have any fucking time left now, thanks to your blank-ass colleague over there.”

He jerked his head toward Oliver, whose blood was already spreading out in a thick, dark pool beneath the holographic barrier. “So we’ll do this the hard way.”

Then he stepped up to me.

I was still trying to process the fact that Oliver—*Oliver*—had just killed himself right in front of us. My thoughts were running like they'd been dragged through gravel, but he didn't give me the chance to catch up.

He crouched down until we were face-to-face, and with one slow, deliberate movement, he removed his helmet.

The helmet came off with a hiss of released pressure, and for the first time, I saw the man's face: Weathered, scarred, and ugly in the way that came from years of surviving things that should've killed him.

But what caught me was the left third of it—frozen in a permanent rictus of pain.

The flesh there was stiff, almost waxy, lips twisted and eye half-closed, locked in some grotesque expression of agony that didn't match the rest of him. The other two-thirds were alive with anger, brows furrowed, teeth bared just enough to show he was relishing this.

"*This*," he growled, voice low and rough, "was a gift from your mother dearest. Over three years ago, now."

He tapped the ruined side of his face with two fingers. "She's got a bit of a knack for causing *permanent* damage, you see. The kind even the best medtech on the market can't scrub out—unless you've got the kind of credits no corporate agent's ever gonna see in their lifetime, of course. A real fucking specialty of hers."

His grin widened, pulling awkwardly across the scar tissue. "One I've gotten pretty good at myself, chasing her slippery ass all these years. And now?"

He leaned in closer, his breath hot against my face. "How fitting that her own children get a first-hand taste of mother-dearest's specialty... *right in front of her*."

He straightened a fraction, raising his voice just enough for Valeria to hear it clearly. "Of course... you could just speak up now. Tell me what I want to know; and we'll just leave. Though that would make your man-toy's little sacrifice over there"—he tilted his head toward Oliver's body—"worth exactly *nothing*."

He got back up, half-turning away from me as he removed his gloves, revealing a pitch-black cybernetic hand on his left.

"So, *Viper*... which is it gonna be?"

He turned to look at her directly, eyes narrowing.

"Waste your children's future... or waste your man-toy's sacrifice...?"