

Chapter 141 - Expectations

Trying to decipher what Valeria *actually* meant by that cryptic jab was like playing high-stakes Go against a chicken—except *I was* the chicken pecking aimlessly at the board.

I didn't know the rules. Couldn't read the pieces.

Hell, I wasn't even sure we were playing the same game in the first place.

So I defaulted to the safest play I knew.

"Yes, Mother. I will ensure stricter adherence to expected behavioural protocols going forward."

Obedience: Executed. Tone: Appropriately deferential, without sounding like I was groveling.

Valeria didn't even blink before reclaiming the floor with that ever-polished blade of corporate grace.

"Beyond that, I am modestly encouraged by your current development arc. I recommend you maintain your upward trajectory with that same unbroken discipline you've displayed so far, daughter," she said, tilting her chin in that fractional, ceremonial nod of approval that was the Valeria-equivalent of a standing ovation.

She returned to perfect posture a second later, already pivoting forward.

"I further acknowledge your willingness to assist your brother in the continued refinement of his martial aptitude, particularly in regards to the Arkion Dojo. However, I must stress that such benevolence must not impede your personal development. I would consider it deeply regrettable were I forced to intervene in the fraternal dynamic due to an imbalance of effort distribution—especially when the resulting stagnation would compromise both your growth vectors."

I nodded without missing a beat.

"Of course, mother. I'll make sure to keep my developmental efforts within optimal thresholds. Miss K herself maintains a rigorous and individualized approach to instruction, and I have full confidence she would flag any downward trend in my performance the moment it manifested. She's... *very* direct with her feedback."

It was a subtle card to play, but an effective one.

I'd seen enough corporate meetings in my past life to know that bringing in a respected third-party authority was a surefire way to dodge suspicion and offload accountability. If Miss K vouched for me—or didn't raise any concerns—then it wasn't on me if Valeria had doubts.

Citing her was like slapping an expert seal of approval onto my work ethic.

“See that you do,” Valeria said, giving me that same imperceptible nod again—just enough to count, but not a fraction more.

‘Bingo!’

Internally, I filed it under a win—even if the pressure building behind my eyes from her earlier warning still hadn’t gone anywhere. I hated not knowing how much she actually knew about what I’d been up to outside the boundaries of her perfectly ordered world.

Operator gigs. Gang ties. The whole damn mess.

“Now,” Valeria continued, controlling the conversation with the ease of someone who never truly let go of it in the first place, “I have been made to understand that you have some manner of request for me, daughter. Your father has been soft-launching it over the course of the past week and asked that I afford you the courtesy of being genuinely heard out—a highly unusual request for him, I must say, which naturally makes me cautious about the nature of what *you* intend to ask.”

Her head turned smoothly toward Oliver, that unreadable smile never quite reaching her eyes.

But Oliver... looked surprisingly serious for once.

No awkward grin. No lighthearted buffer. Just a single, quiet nod toward Valeria, followed by one aimed directly at me—wordless, but solid.

‘Thanks, Oliver.’

I hadn’t been sure he’d actually follow through. Part of me had figured he’d forget, or brush it off as a passing comment, or decide that the timing wasn’t right.

But clearly, I’d underestimated him on this.

He’d backed me up, and now the ball was squarely in my court.

Valeria’s eyes returned to mine—sharp, focused and thoroughly expectant.

That was my cue.

Time to roll out the carefully curated, meticulously phrased, “*please let me dig into the one thing you explicitly didn’t want anyone to touch*” pitch, and pray to whatever higher powers ran this world that I had picked the right angle to make it stick.

I met her eyes—steadily, calmly, like I’d practiced—and began.

“As you have correctly surmised, Mother, I do indeed have a request to make, though I would first like to preface it with context I believe to be highly relevant to the matter at hand: My amnesia, while no longer fully debilitating, continues to present intermittent complications in both my day-to-day interactions and long-term cognitive reconstruction. There have been

repeated instances of memory confusion, misattributed associations, and moments of disorientation that, while manageable, remain a source of inefficiency and concern.”

I paused, just briefly, before continuing in the most polished corporate tone I could muster.

“Examples include the inability to recognize particular building layouts within the Megabuilding, despite clearly having visited them in the past; failing to recall individuals who recognize me and attempt conversation, leading to awkward or inefficient exchanges; and more recently, an incident involving a confused response to a known operating system shortcut that had previously been muscle memory. I do not list these to excuse any behavior, but to highlight that full integration with my prior experiences has not yet occurred.”

These were, of course, entirely fabricated examples.

But I’d spent hours crafting them—situations that fit neatly within the expected parameters of general post-traumatic amnesia.

Not so major that they’d raise red flags or warrant deep medical investigation, but just inconvenient enough to sound plausible. The kind of memory hiccups no one would really follow up on, yet couldn’t easily disprove without jumping through unnecessary hoops.

Just the right level of believable—or so I hoped.

Naturally, however, Valeria gave no reaction about her thoughts on the matter whatsoever.

No twitch of the eye, no arch of the brow.

Just that same perfectly neutral, vaguely expectant mask she always wore.

So I pushed forward.

“With that in mind, I believe there is potential value in forging a small, controlled bridge to my former life—one point of contact that might assist in reducing the severity of these inconsistencies. Furthermore, I am aware that there is still a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the exact nature of my previous incident, and I have no doubt that your efforts in that regard have been both thorough and exhaustive. As such, that singular point of contact could be valuable for more than one reason. Not to replace professional care or investigative efforts, but to augment them both.”

Still no change in her expression at all.

“However, given the intricacies of JOI-enforced compartmentalization and the intentionally obfuscated nature of the subgroups operating within that structure, I imagine that even the most comprehensive surveillance or forensic analysis has likely run into a significant number of brick walls in tracing my final hours leading up to the incident, which I have been made to understand, I might have spent with or in the general vicinity of the individual in question.”

I drew in a breath, trying to keep myself level.

“Ultimately, I believe I can assist in that effort. Or, at the very least, reduce the mental tax currently affecting my own forward development. But I want to make it explicitly clear that I am *not* requesting a reintroduction to my former social circle. I am not seeking to recover what was lost for the sake of nostalgia or emotion.”

My posture straightened as I moved into the final point.

“I am asking only for the contact ID of one individual—Rina. That is the full extent of my request. Should the ID still be connected to her, I will reach out for the sole purpose of establishing contact. If it is inactive or leads nowhere, I will not pursue any further attempts to reach out to her. I will also not request any additional contact IDs from my previous cerebral interface, nor will I solicit any such information from Rina herself unless she brings up details that are directly tied to the circumstances of the incident. In such a case, I will forward that data to you, Mother, before taking any further steps with it.”

My voice softened, just a touch—still corpo, but with a sliver of genuine intent slipping through.

“I am not seeking to undermine your efforts in my recovery nor the investigation in the incident. I am merely seeking a tool to aid my own recovery further and perhaps, in the process, *aid* your ongoing investigation as well.”

I dipped my head as I wrapped up the request, keeping my gaze glued to the plate in front of me.

Dinner sat there untouched, topped with one of those overly polished KeepAllFresh™ domes—chrome-slick and spotless, like it had been buffed ten seconds ago.

Whatever Valeria had decided on for tonight was sealed underneath, undoubtedly kept at the perfect temperature and moisture level to keep it preserved as if it had just been freshly made and plated.

Yet... I *wanted* to glance up.

Just a quick look, maybe catch a twitch of expression, anything that might give me a read, even though I already knew better: Valeria didn't do tells—not the visible kind, anyway.

Still, the instinct clawed at me.

I forced it down and sat rigid, with my head bowed, instead, all polite posture and corporate discipline, sticking to the protocol like it actually meant something.

‘At least as long as Valeria still prefers the corporate way... That whole thing with Gabe’s request... I’m not even sure this is the right play anymore. But I’m a bit too deep at this stage to stop, huh?’

Valeria didn't answer. Not right away.

She let the silence settle, deliberate and calculated, like every second was being logged for a quarterly report. No motion, no breath I could hear—just that cold executive stillness, the

kind you learned in boardrooms where mistakes cost billions of credits and, even more horrifying, reputations.

It felt like forever.

I was thankful for my newly upgraded Edge.

It gave me enough leeway to regulate breathing, to stop the tension from grinding into my jaw or leaking into a tremble, without having to dip into my Ego—I really did not want to burn the active Ego, now that I knew there was a limit on it, unless absolutely necessary.

Then finally, she spoke up—measured, precise, like she was reading from a script she’d rewritten six times already.

“After reviewing the broader context and correlating it with the behavioral patterns observed, I can now understand why your father has maintained such persistent involvement over the past week.”

The pause that followed wasn’t long, but it was weighty.

I heard the faint shift of her posture—a slight turn, probably toward Oliver—but I didn’t risk looking. Not until I knew whether I was in the clear or not.

Her attention returned to me like a tracking sensor locking back on target.

“I must admit... It would be inaccurate to deny the current stalemate in actionable progress in regards to the investigation. As you’ve outlined, daughter, the JOI-unit subnetwork is... exceptionally cohesive. Their internal loyalty is beyond reproach, however reprehensible their chosen line of work might be. We’ve attempted incentives, asset realignment, and discreet pressure—none have yielded viable results. Extraction without escalated methods is, at this stage, seemingly nonviable.”

She didn’t say *torture*. Didn’t need to.

The implication sat between the words like fine print.

She continued, smoothly pivoting. “Regarding your lingering memory irregularities—I find the persistence of the issue distinctly suboptimal. I’ll be reallocating some personal time to examine potential cognitive remediation vectors with vetted professionals on the matter.”

Another pause. Longer this time, like she was actively thinking this entire thing through.

“I want to be perfectly clear,” she said, tone flattening to executive steel, “that I do *not* support this course of action from a preference standpoint. Re-introduction to your previous life under current circumstances is... not a precedent I’m comfortable normalizing. Particularly when it comes to certain sections of said previous-incident life, that should never have been allowed to persist to begin with.”

‘She’s talking about that Luca guy here, guaranteed,’ I thought immediately. *‘I wonder if Valeria ever tried to “persuade” him in regards to the investigation... Given that everything I*

know about the guy sounds like he's mostly a loner, I doubt he has the kind of support network Rina and the JOI-girls have, that keep them relatively safe in that regard...'

Valeria continued her rundown.

"However, the argumentation presented was structurally and logically sound, as much as I would like to find inadequacies in your presentation to deny this request... *And* your father's endorsement—considering his historical lean towards caution, his risk-averse tendencies, and his general reluctance to interface with matters such as these, particularly the raising of both you and your brother—speaks volumes. His alignment with this request, as such, cannot be ignored."

A deep breath. Not audible, but felt.

"In light of all these considerations... I am prepared to approve the request."

But of course, there was the qualifier.

"Only under strict adherence to the pre-established conditions, however: No pursuit of legacy contacts unless their involvement becomes categorically necessary to the ongoing investigation. And if said threshold should be met, those contacts will be flagged and submitted to me directly. You will not act independently on this matter. Do you agree to these terms, daughter?"

I nodded immediately. "Yes, mother. I understand the terms of the agreement and agree to them fully."

It wasn't exactly a hard promise to make—considering I'd written those terms myself.

Hell, I barely had any interest in getting to know Luca at all in the first place.

Based on everything I knew about him from the second-hand descriptions of both Gabe and Oliver? There was no point in ever pursuing that connection.

Still, the outcome felt almost too good to be true.

'That went...way smoother than I expected.'

I'd come into this prepared for trade-offs, ready to sacrifice a bit of freedom here, some autonomy there.

But Oliver's influence was clearly pulling a lot more weight than I'd anticipated. And maybe, just maybe, my carefully structured arguments had managed to land exactly right on Valeria.

She did love her logic bulletproof, her reasoning neatly formatted.

I'd given her precisely that, and she'd seemingly bitten down hard.

'Maybe that's the way to get to her... As long as you can manage to throw together a truly good argument, that is. I doubt she'd fold just because I structured things well, if she sees any clear openings to exploit.'

Valeria gave a short nod, perfectly measured and final. “Very well. I’ll transfer the ID once dinner concludes. It will be yours to use—within the agreed-upon parameters.”

There was no ceremony to it, no further warning.

Just a clean handoff, as if we’d signed a document and filed it in triplicate.

Then, without missing a beat, she shifted tone, pivoting with that usual smoothness that made even social niceties feel like part of a quarterly planning session around her.

“Well then,” she said, voice softening just a touch, “now that the primary business has been handled, I suggest we all take a moment to enjoy each other’s company. It’s not often we get time like this anymore—especially with how things have been lately.”

She extended one manicured hand and gestured gracefully toward the covered plates. “Please.”

I didn’t need a second invitation.

The dome slid off with a quiet hiss of preserved air, and the scent hit me first—warm, layered, rich.

My eyes landed on a dish that looked like something out of a high-end culinary archive: Slices of seared meat, pink-centered and crusted in herbs I couldn’t name, resting over a delicate swirl of black pepper pasta.

A miniature salad sat to the side, built like a sculpture—shaved greens, something that looked awfully close to blood orange slices, microgreens, and crumbled cheese that *definitely* hadn’t been printed. Even the dressing had that glossy texture that only came from ingredients that were actually grown, not fabricated, or so my [Cooking] knowledge told me.

Based on the last time Valeria had treated the family like this, I was pretty confident this entire spread was honest-to-god proper, real food.

Nothing synthetic at all.

I was half-ready to just dig in without hesitation, but a quiet thought lodged in the back of my mind.

‘Please let this be clean this time. Just food. No add-ons, no enhancements, no “correctional measure” snuck in like last time...’

Once had definitely been more than enough.

Valeria didn’t say a word, but the faint curve of her lips said enough.

She watched us, sipping from a glass of something amber and aged, as if she were observing a well-executed presentation rather than her own family.

Oliver let out an exaggerated hum of approval the moment he got a whiff, leaning in close like the steam itself deserved analysis.

“Is that some form of mushroom...?” he asked no one in particular, already halfway to dissecting his plate with gleeful precision.

Gabriel followed suit with a dramatic sigh. “Mum, you really don’t have to do all this for us.”

Then, without missing a beat: “Though I’m extremely glad you always do.”

Only once she’d let their reactions stretch for a few seconds—just long enough to savor their approval—did she give the nod.

A quiet, elegant “*now you may eat.*”

I stuck to the strategy that had worked before: Mimic the queen.

I waited until Valeria reached for a fork and noted the exact dish she started with—the meat, sliced with surgical care.

I mirrored her movements, right down to how she held the utensils.

The moment the first bite hit my tongue, [Cooking] kicked in like a silent commentary track.

The meat wasn’t just seared—it had been basted in a herb-spice reduction during the final minute, locking in that umami-forward crust. The inner pink was precision work—pan-seared first to seal in the juices, then low-temp cooked to perfection.

The Skill highlighted the kind of balance I never would have been able to truly care about, much less name in-detail: Protein to fat ratio, enzyme tenderization, even the faint aftertaste of smoked salt dusted post-plating.

I would’ve just called it *amazing* in my last life.

But here, I could practically chart the flavor map thanks to [Cooking].

The black pepper pasta wasn’t just a garnish either.

Freshly rolled linguine-like noodles, made from real flour—aradia flour, as the Skill told me, though I had no idea what that was—with flecks of something it identified as Radcherry pepper that added a warm, citrusy heat.

Even the oil clinging to the strands had a soft herb-type base, though this time around the Skill failed to identify it. There was, however, also something richer—maybe some kind of nut in there, but once again, the Skill failed me.

‘*Too low of a Level for that one, huh?*’

Even the relatively simple side-salad was a layered experience.

The blood orange-thing wasn’t just there for color I realised as I bit into the first fork full—it added a very nice level of acidity, the shaved greens cut through it with a licorice sharpness, and the microgreens weren’t just random fluff either; they had a peppery snap, that balanced very nicely with the other two parts.

Every bite wasn't just food—it was perfect calibration. Real ingredients stacked with purpose.

And for once, I was able to fully understand what that meant.

But more amazingly than that?

'No extra additions from what I can tell...!'

Just as that thought hit me and I swallowed the last of my first-bites of each, I was also greeted by a System Notification.

Not particularly busy, I risked a peak, figuring it might be another [Cooking] Level.

But instead, I was greeted by something I hadn't been expecting at all.

[System]: You have *received* 1x Buff [Venison Noir Meal], lasting for 23:59:59.

'A food buff...?' I thought, thoroughly taken aback.

While I had expected them to exist, especially after my run-in with one of MiXer's creations just earlier today, I hadn't expected to gain one this quickly.

Especially considering that none of the other family dinners had given one like that before.

'Though... Now that I think about it...' I mused. 'I guess it makes sense. The first one was Oliver's treat and the second one wasn't the original recipe, considering Valeria's "addition"... Maybe that's what fried the recipe, so there was no buff attached to it afterwards?'

I followed the notification with a simple mental confirmation and it opened the [Buffs] Interface for me, listing off what the [Venison Noir Meal] actually did.

[Venison Noir Meal]

- 75% increased blood filtration.
- 50% increased cold resistance.
- 20% increased concentration.
- 10% increased Body Attribute coefficient.

'Not bad at all...!'

The 10% boost to my Body Attribute coefficient was *fucking* awesome. Seriously.

That was basically like getting a clean half-rank on top of my current 5—without needing to actually grind for it. I could get so much done with this kind of buff backing me.

Combat drills, movement training, physical resistance routines... it all stacked faster.

It was one of those long-hyped strategies people had been theorycrafting ever since the DLC leak hinted at [Cooking] becoming an active player-side system.

Food buffs weren't exactly new to *Neon Dragons*, but until now, only NPCs had ever cooked them. They'd been background flavor—quite literally.

But with the drop of the DLC, the meta would've undoubtedly shifted. Players would finally be able to prep and optimize with exact consumable loadouts, and buffs like these were suddenly targetable and worth their weight in gold.

And the real beauty? The coefficient didn't raise the Attribute *value* itself—it boosted its *output*. No penalty to XP gain, no slowed progression.

Normally, leveling a Skill or raising an Attribute meant exponential grind.

The higher you got, the harder it became to gain even a fraction of progress. But coefficient buffs bypassed that, giving a temporary power spike without dragging your scaling through the mud.

Honestly, I was *this* close to excusing myself and diving into a 24-hour training circuit just to capitalize on the edge while it lasted.

But I knew better.

No matter how tempting the numbers were, walking out mid-dinner for that kind of stuff would've been... ill-advised, especially with Valeria opposite the table from me.

So instead, I stuck to the plan.

Watched her cues. Matched her pace.

Ate what she ate, how she ate it, and made the most of the fifteen minutes that followed.

Conversation drifted in and out around the table—if you could call it that.

Valeria's presence ensured everything got filtered through at least three layers of corporate speak and strategic positioning. Even when Gabriel tried to joke a few times, it ended up sounding like he was pitching an idea in a product meeting.

Still, Oliver and Gabe both let out more than a few appreciative groans as they ate, like they were reviewing a five-star meal live on stream.

And honestly? I couldn't blame them.

It wasn't a bad time.

Surprisingly decent, even with the ever-looming specter of Valeria sitting in.

In a weird way, it was... downright relaxing.

Not the cozy kind of relaxing—not soft rain on the roof or a warm drink on a couch.

This was the calm that came from knowing your role inside and out, and you know how to perform it properly.

Every word, every move, calculated and executed clean.

No guesswork. No surprises. Just performance.

And for once, that kind of clarity felt really good.

I had tuned in to the conversation at times, drifting off into my own thoughts or trying to identify more things about the food with my [Cooking] Skill.

“...so naturally, when Operations flagged the discrepancy, I requested a full third-party packet scrub. The other executive tried to claim it was a pipeline delay, but I had already reviewed the thermal freight records. I said—” she paused for emphasis, offering the faintest smile, “If your data integrity is so airtight, then I’m sure you won’t mind if Legal does a little leak test.”

Valeria had been mid-anecdote—one of many that evening—delivered with her usual boardroom polish. She’d been recounting a logistics audit on Neo Avalis’s southern corridor, each word chosen like it had passed through compliance first.

Oliver chuckled at the recounting. Gabriel gave a theatrical “Oof” though I doubted he knew what she was even talking about—as I didn’t know either.

Valeria raised her glass slightly, a mock toast to her own rhetorical kill.

“...I said—”

Silence.

No stutter. No filler.

Just a full stop, mid-thought.

My fork hovered in place as my mind tried to catch up.

Valeria *never* interrupted herself.

I looked up, expecting the usual ice-queen stare, some pointed glance about manners or decorum, figuring that Gabriel had stepped over the line one too many times tonight.

Instead, I met something else entirely.

Something far more horrifying.

Emotion. Specifically, Confusion.

Not irritation *masked* as curiosity. Actual, *raw* confusion.

Her brow slightly furrowed, lips parted just enough to show she’d forgotten what she was even saying. Her eyes weren’t focused on the table or any of us—they were somewhere far off, lost in a discrepancy in her plans for tonight that she wasn’t trained to handle.

My heart started pounding hard.

My Edge spiked, flooding me with tight, cold clarity.

Even my passive Ego had to step in and reign back the adrenaline flooding my body.

Something was *off*.

The entire room had followed her into stillness.

Oliver stopped mid-chew, Gabriel's hand froze near his glass, and I swear I heard the ventilation hum for the first time all evening.

The silence wasn't just awkward—it was *wrong*.

Then her expression gradually changed again.

The confusion faded—and what replaced it made my blood go cold.

Concern.

Genuine. Unmasked. The kind of concern that didn't belong on her face, because I hadn't thought she was capable of feeling it, let alone showing it.

And then—

Click.

A mechanical click, sharp and surgical, just past the threshold of the dining room.

So soft I might've missed it if I hadn't already been listening for *something*.

It came from the apartment door...