

Chapter 200 - Even more Shards

Remembering the shard I'd snagged during the gig with Higgins and his crew, I turned back around and walked into my room, grabbing it out of the DuraPack after a brief bit of searching.

'I guess here goes nothing, then...'

I gingerly slotted it in, making sure to spool up a separate partition to load it into first—no way in hell was I raw-dogging a random datashard pulled off a Scav hideout floor without isolating it from the rest of my system first.

Basic Runner hygiene—and common sense, really.

A few moments passed as my cerebral link started heating up noticeably, working through the encryption on the shard. The fact that it was chewing through it without any real input or prompting from me meant the encryption was rudimentary at best—which, in turn, meant there likely wasn't anything of real value on it. Unfortunate.

"Ahh, well... Can't exactly hope to just find a shard with a bunch of Creds on it now, can I?" I muttered, just as the decryption finished its work.

[Do you want to display the contents of Datashard: "Personal Log: Daven Ouli"?]

I considered it for a moment.

'A personal log...? Like a diary?' I made a face. 'Not sure I really want to be snooping around in somebody's actual diary...'

Then again—I'd *already* stolen and cracked it.

The ethical horse was very much out of the barn at this point. Might as well get at least *some* enjoyment out of the whole thing, given that I clearly wasn't getting any Credits out of it.

I confirmed the prompt and let the shard display its contents to me as I started my morning workout routine—a bit of entertainment on the side couldn't hurt, after all.

[Displaying content of Datashard: "Personal Log: Daven Ouli"]

[PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION]

Name: Daven Ouli

Age: 34

Employee ID: VD-7734-OULi

Department: Materials Acquisitions & Logistics — Sub-Division C

Position: Low-tier Procurement Coordinator

Employer: Vorpall Dynamics, Neo Avalis Regional Operations
Floor Assignment: 17th Floor, Spire B, Neo Avalis Corporate Zone (Layer 3)
Residential Assignment: Kuller Street 306B, Junction 9, District 7 (Commercial-Residential
Overlap Zone) — Fourth Layer

[PERSONAL LOG ENTRIES — SELECTED EXCERPTS]

[Recovered: 31 of 38 entries. 7 entries unrecoverable — sector corruption.]

Entry 001

Eleven months ago.

Got the transfer approved today.

Fourth layer housing, which isn't exactly what I had in mind when I signed the five-year contract with VD, but it's subsidized and the alternative is paying rent out of pocket on this awful salary, which I've done the math on and the math is *not* good.

Mira thinks it's fine.

She keeps saying it's temporary, and she's probably right.

Get the experience, get the promotion, get out of the subsidized bracket and into something we *actually* chose.

That's the plan.

Unit's fairly small, but surprisingly generous with number of rooms—at least that.

Entry 007

Ten months ago.

Work is—*work*...

Acquisitions at VD is less interesting than the recruiter made it sound, which I should have anticipated because recruiters are professionally obligated to make everything sound more interesting than it is.

What I actually do is coordinate material sourcing for manufacturing contracts, which means a lot of spreadsheets and a lot of calls with suppliers who don't want to be on calls and a lot of documentation for purchases that someone three levels above me has already decided are happening regardless of what *my* documentation says.

Mira got a position at a medical clinic on the 22nd floor of the local VD HQ.

Good pay, better hours than before.

Things are finally looking up, *genuinely*.

Entry 014

Eight months ago.

Something came across my desk today that I don't entirely know what to do with.

Standard acquisitions package, flagged for my sign-off—materials sourcing for a manufacturing contract, Sub-Division C's jurisdiction.

Almost routine... Except the supplier listed *doesn't exist* in any of the verified vendor databases I have access to, the delivery addresses are all routing through a logistics shell that I've seen used before for sensitive contracts, and the material specifications in the attached technical sheet don't match *anything* in our standard manufacturing catalogue.

I flagged it to my direct supervisor, Hendricks.

He told me to process it and not worry about it. That some contracts operated under different documentation standards for compliance reasons.

I processed it.

I saved a copy of the documentation to this shard.

I don't know *why* I did that.

Instinct, maybe...

Entry 015

Eight months ago, three days later.

I looked up the material specifications in the technical sheet.

Took me a while because the terminology was deliberately obscure.

I... think I understand what I was looking at.

The materials listed are consistent with component sourcing for *area-denial* weaponry.

Specifically, the ones with a *civilian* casualty profile that makes them illegal under three separate Neo Avalis municipal ordinances and at least one inter-corporate non-proliferation agreement that Vorpal Dynamics is a signatory to...

I'm probably wrong.

I'm a damn procurement coordinator, not a weapons engineer.

I'm probably missing a ton of context that makes this completely routine and legitimate.

I saved another copy of the technical sheet anyway.

Entry 019

Seven months ago.

Three more packages. Same supplier routing. Same shell logistics address.

Different material specs but the same... *shape* to them, if that makes sense.

The same deliberate obscurity. The same feeling when I looked at them.

I processed all three. I saved copies of all three.

Hendricks gave me a performance commendation last week. Best quarter of my VD career.

Mira asked me last night if something was wrong. I told her work was busy.

She accepted that... I *think* she accepted that.

Entry 023

Six months ago.

I've been doing research in my own time, *carefully*, using public terminals rather than anything connected to my VD credentials.

The supplier routing shell—I can't get into it directly, but the registration trail is thin enough that I found a partial name attached to one of the subsidiary filings.

HarakenZ Consolidated.

I don't know that name. It doesn't appear in any of VD's official vendor documentation.

But it appears in fourteen separate news items from the last five years, all of them about municipal contract disputes in the lower layers, all of them involving infrastructure projects that went *significantly* over budget and delivered significantly less than promised, and all of them quietly settled without public disclosure.

This is probably nothing.

I keep saving copies of things that I probably shouldn't... This is a dumb idea.

Entry 027

Five months ago.

Hendricks called me into his office today.

He told me that my access credentials were being *adjusted*—routine security rotation, he said, standard for anyone at my level who'd been in the role for over six months.

I'd be losing access to Sub-Division C's sensitive contract pipeline.

Reassigned to standard domestic acquisitions going forward.

I thanked him and went back to my desk.

I still have *all* the copies.

Entry 031

Four months ago.

Someone has been in our unit.

Nothing was taken. Nothing was visibly disturbed...

But Mira has a *specific* way of leaving things—particular habits, particular arrangements that she doesn't ever vary; she gets mad at me if I mess it up, too—and yet *three* of them were *wrong* this morning.

I didn't tell Mira.

I transferred the shard to a secondary location in the unit.

Not a great hiding spot—I don't *have* great hiding spots, I'm a damn procurement coordinator—but at least somewhere less obvious than a hidden compartment in my desk.

I've started looking at transfer options within VD. Different building, different floor assignment.

Mira doesn't know yet.

Entry 034

Three months ago.

The transfer was denied.

No real reason given. HR said my current role was better suited to my skill profile.

I've started looking at exit options instead.

Full contract departure, penalty clause and all.

The penalty is... *significant* though.

I've been doing the math on whether we can absorb it—the math is not good.

Entry 036

Two months ago.

We're leaving the unit. Not the contract—I haven't resolved the contract yet—but the unit.

Mira agreed without asking too many questions, which means she's noticed more than she's said, which means I've been less subtle than I thought.

We have *somewhere* to go.

Friend of Mira's on the 31st floor, temporary. Not ideal, but better than here.

I'm leaving the shard.

I know that sounds irrational.

But if I take it and something happens, it goes with me. If I leave it, it stays.

Someone finds it eventually or nobody does, but either way it isn't *on me* when I walk out of this building...

The copies are all there.

The technical sheets, the supplier routing, the HarakenZ Consolidated filings, the commendation Hendricks gave me six weeks before he had my access pulled...

Make of it what you want, whoever you are.

I hope I'm just being paranoid.

[ATTACHED FILES: 14]

- Acquisitions Package VD-C-0091 (*flagged copy, original sign-off confirmed*)
- Acquisitions Package VD-C-0094 (*flagged copy*)
- Acquisitions Package VD-C-0097 (*flagged copy*)
- Acquisitions Package VD-C-0098 (*flagged copy*)
- Technical Specification Sheet TS-0091-MAT (*partial — 2 pages*)
- Technical Specification Sheet TS-0094-MAT (*complete — 4 pages*)
- Technical Specification Sheet TS-0097-MAT (*complete — 3 pages*)
- Technical Specification Sheet TS-0098-MAT (*complete — 3 pages*)
- Vendor Registration Search — HarakenZ Consolidated (*public terminal extract*)
- News Archive — Municipal Contract Dispute 2081 (*partial*)
- News Archive — Municipal Contract Dispute 2083 (*partial*)

- News Archive — Municipal Contract Dispute 2084 (*complete*)
 - Performance Commendation — D. Ouli, Sub-Division C, Q3 (*VD internal document*)
 - HR Transfer Denial — D. Ouli (*VD internal document*)
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[END OF SHARD CONTENT]

[TOTAL READABLE DATA: 81.57%]

[SHARD STATUS: Intact. Ready for secondary decryption if applicable.]

I sat back on the edge of the bed, halfway through the third set of my morning workout routine, and just... stared at the ceiling for a moment as my brain caught up with what I'd just absorbed.

Three reactions hit me, more or less simultaneously.

The first was surprise. Genuine surprise, at the implications buried in what I'd thought was going to be some random corpo drone's diary.

Vorpal Dynamics wasn't exactly a *household* name from the game. Not in the way that the major Corpsos were—your Sobirashus, your QuantitativeDynamics, your BlackPixel Works, etc.

VD had been more of a background entity, mentioned in flavor text and corporate news bulletins, briefly relevant in a handful of side missions but never one of the major players.

Still, I knew enough about them to place them roughly correctly: Mid-tier weapons manufacturer. Not exactly insignificant, but definitely not market-defining either, with enough reach and reputation that they had a public profile worth maintaining—and enough of a footprint to remain inside my thoroughly cheese-holed memory from my past life.

A mid-tier weapons manufacturer importing or sourcing inter-corporate-agreement-banned components through a shell vendor though...?

'That's a lot bigger than a random personal log has any business being,' I thought, fingers drumming slowly against my knee. *'Like—**significantly** bigger. Something you'd think a corporation would be looking **very** hard to clean up...'*

The second reaction had honestly been the *first* one, chronologically—it had hit me about halfway through the entries and only been confirmed the further on I read—and it was the sheer, jaw-dropping stupidity of Daven Ouli himself.

*'I'm genuinely surprised he managed to catch and compile **any** of this in the first place,'* I thought, and the unkindness of it didn't even register as a problem given the evidence in front of me. *'The guy's an actual idiot. A fucking complete Blank.'*

Like—the very last entry talked about him being worried about getting caught with the shard on him. About someone tracking him through it or something. About how he wanted to leave it behind precisely so it wouldn't be found on him personally when he and Mira walked out of that apartment.

The *exact same shard* had his *full legal government* name on the first damn page!

And his Employee-ID. *And* his employer. *And* his department. *And* his residential address. *And* his wife's name and her workplace, too!

'Is he actually just unfathomably stupid? Like—at a fundamental level? Is the very concept of OpSec just genuinely beyond him...?'

The whole personal log had been written under what Daven had clearly believed was paranoia-grade caution, and yet he'd structured the document like a personnel file.

If anyone with even *passing* competence had gotten hold of this thing while the encryption was still cracked—which, I now realized, included *me*—they'd have a complete dossier on him within two seconds of opening the damn thing.

The third reaction, which arrived quite a bit more slowly than the first two, was: *'What the hell am I supposed to do with this?'*

My initial gut response had been to hand it directly to Valeria.

She was, by a wide margin, the most corpo-savvy person I had any kind of access to, and something like this—inter-corporate non-proliferation violations, shell vendor routing, internal documentation theft—fell squarely into her professional wheelhouse. She'd know *exactly* what it was worth, who would want it, and what the safest disposal channel looked like.

The other obvious option was to pawn it off through a Fixer or an information broker via the OPN. Sell it on as a clean intel package and let someone with actual handling expertise figure out what to do with it.

Less personal return, probably—I had no doubt Valeria would be downright *ecstatic* about my find, which would no doubt manifest as a variant of "Admirable work, Seraphine" or similarly out-of-this-world praise from her end—but also far less risk of any blowback finding its way to me or my family down the line.

Even with Valeria handling it personally, there was a non-zero chance the trail could eventually wind its way back to us. Corporations had long memories and even longer reaches.

With an Information Broker or Fixer hand-off, though, that variable was effectively zeroed out—we'd have no traceable connection to the shard whatsoever.

No Ether Labs employees or shells digging around, *nothing*.

I turned that over for a few minutes while resuming my workout, getting the rest of the morning routine done on autopilot while the back of my brain kept rotating the problem

around—and somewhere between the second-to-last set of crunches and the cooldown stretches, another option occurred to me.

'Would Misha know anything about these substances?'

The thought stopped me mid-stretch.

Because Misha, unlike Daven, *was* a weapons engineer.

Not at corporate-grade level, sure, but she handled fabrication and customization on a daily basis, knew her materials well enough to identify modifications at a glance, and had a working familiarity with what got bought, sold, and traded in Neo Avalis' gear ecosystem.

She might recognize the specifications in the attached technical sheets. Or at least be able to give me a sense of how serious the substances involved *actually* were.

Because there was a *significant* gap between “*highly illegal, gets-you-quickly-disappeared*” substances and “*technically illegal, mild slap on the wrist if anyone bothers to enforce it*” substances. And how I ultimately handled the shard from here on out would likely depend *entirely* on which side of that gap it actually fell on.

And—conveniently—I had to meet Misha today anyway. For the Kinetic Dampening Mask.

'So there's really no reason not to at least ask, before making a real decision here,' I concluded, finishing the last stretch and rolling back up to standing. 'Frame it casually. See how she reacts. If she goes pale and starts looking around for cameras, then I know exactly what kind of shard I'm sitting on. If she shrugs and goes "Misha has seen worse," then I can probably hand it off to Valeria with no worries about it bringing trouble... Though either way, double-checking with Valeria would probably be smart as well. If she decides it's not worth the risk, I can still bring it to a Broker afterwards.'

The bigger question, though, was *who* I was going to be when I asked her.

Sera or Ela.

That one answered itself almost immediately though, honestly speaking.

I'd gotten the shard *as* Ela.

And Ela was a known entity to Misha—established trust, established rapport, *established friendship*, even. If *anyone* could ask Misha about questionable substances without risking her flipping on them to whoever she might be obligated to flip to, it was Ela.

Sera, on the other hand? Sera had never met Misha in her entire life.

Misha had no reason to extend any kind of discretion to a complete stranger, especially not in Neo Avalis, where information had value and that value was *always* being traded.

Not to mention, I had absolutely *no idea* what kind of corporate agreement the Emporium—and Misha by extension—was actually bound to. For all I knew, Misha had a

standing arrangement to report any inquiries about specific weapons-related contraband to Rockefeller Inc as part of the lease agreement.

They were, after all, a weapons manufacturing corporation as well. It would make sense.

'I guess I'll have to bring both outfits with me, huh?' I thought, glancing back toward the DuraPack. *'Sera for the mask purchase. Ela for the shard inquiry. And I'll have to figure out how to separate the two visits convincingly enough that Misha doesn't connect them...'*

That was going to take some thought.

As I finished up the workout and started getting ready for the post-workout shower, I also grabbed the last of the datashards I'd pulled from the gig—the loot shard.

I hopped under the shower, let the hot water start working on the residual tightness across my shoulders, and slotted the loot shard in.

Time to see what the gacha luck was looking like today...

[System]: *Decrypting (Common) Data-Shard #028... Success! Loot gained from Data-Shard needs to be claimed to be transferred.*

[==Common Data-Shard #028 Contents==]

[1x Synth Skin-Mask (Male)]

[{c}12 Credits]

I stared at the notification for several long seconds, trying to parse what the System was actually telling me.

'I got... a fucking skin-mask... That's what I got? What the hell am I supposed to do with a male Synth Skin-Mask, System? Are you serious?'

I had exactly zero uses for something like that. None. Zero.

Especially not a (*Male*) variant one—I'd draw *more* attention to myself wearing the damn thing than simply not wearing it in the first place. A teenage girl wandering around with the face of a man, in the wrong proportions, with no matching body or voice to sell the disguise?

That was the kind of thing that ended in an immediate stop-and-search the moment anyone with a working pair of eyes looked at me twice.

Skin-Masks were effectively fake skin you could fit over your own head—hence the name "mask." Mostly used at costume parties, masquerades, or by the occasional cosplay enthusiast on the higher floors who wanted to pretend they were someone they weren't for an evening.

Basic Synth Skin-Masks weren't even particularly expensive, which showed in both the make *and* the quality—and I had absolutely no reason to suspect this particular one was anything special, given the complete lack of additional descriptors and the fact that it had dropped from a (*Common*) Lootshard.

'Well... at least I got 12 Credits out of it. Better than nothing, I guess.'

I claimed the Credits and left the Skin-Mask sitting in my Inventory for now.

Never knew when something like that might come in handy—like the plasma torch had. I hadn't had a real idea of what to use *that* one for either, right up until I'd *genuinely* needed it.

With the loot shard claimed, the Skin-Mask filed away, and the morning's downloads thoroughly settled into my skull and muscles, I finished my shower in increasingly slow stages—partly because the hot water was genuinely doing wonders for the residual Network burn, and partly because I was *very* deliberately stalling on the one thing I had been quietly trying to avoid all morning.

I had Rina's ID now.

Which meant I no longer had any excuse not to send the message.

I leaned my forehead against the cool tiles for a moment, hot water running down my back, and tried to figure out how, *exactly*, one was supposed to message an old friend that you no longer remembered.

An old friend who, by all reasonable accounts, had thought you were *dead* for several weeks.

An old friend whose only continued belief that you were still alive was Gabriel telling her so, which—given that I couldn't remember a single thing about her—was almost more cruel than just letting her grieve, in some twisted way.

The Sera she'd known was, functionally speaking, *dead*.

The Sera writing the message was nothing but a stranger wearing her face.

That had been Old Sera's life. Old Sera's friendships. Old Sera's connections.

I knew absolutely *nothing* about Rina beyond a handful of broad-strokes facts: She was a JOI-girl, she'd somehow been friends with Old Sera, and she'd likely been with Old Sera the night Old Sera had gone missing.

The night, in other words, that I had ended up in this body.

How did one even *start* a conversation like that?

I considered it for several minutes while the water continued its slow, deliberate massage across my shoulders and lower back. I tried a few openings in my head.

Discarded all of them—too formal, too cold, too over-explanatory, too obviously fake-casual.

Every variant felt like it was trying too hard in some specific direction.

Eventually, I just decided to go with the most straightforward thing I could come up with.

["Hey there, Rina. It's Sera... Wondering if you'd like to meet sometime soon? I lost quite a bit of my memories, not sure if Gabe told you, but I'd really like to catch up. Maybe put some things in order again or something... Sorry for not reaching out earlier."]

I read through it three times.

'Probably good enough.'

Rina had been the one trying to reach *me* for weeks.

It was probably entirely irrelevant *what* the actual content of the message was—as long as I mentioned that I was available, the rest would sort itself out.

I sent it off.

Not even ten seconds later, my cerebral interface chimed with a reply.

["SERA?! Fuck, YES, I want to meet you blank-ass bitch! I can make time RIGHT NOW! Where do you want to meet?! I'll let the other girls know to take my customers! IS IT REALLY YOU?!"]

I blinked at the wall.

'Huh.' I felt my eyebrows climb. *'Well... she's kind of krass. But I guess that probably makes sense, considering... everything, really.'*

The energy of the response, more than the content of it, was honestly kind of charming.

Whatever else Rina Yonikana was, she clearly didn't believe in playing it cool.

I considered the message for a moment, then typed out a reply.

*["It's really me. Mother finally gave me your ID from my old Cerebral Interface. Couldn't message you before... **Seriously** sorry about that. We can meet later today, I have some errands to run first. Say... Around 4pm? I have no idea **where** to meet though. When I mentioned I have some memory holes... They're pretty bad. Any chance you could come to Delta?"]*

I sent it. The reply was almost immediate.

*["Will be there at 4pm! You have **A LOT** of fucking explaining to do!"]*

I let out a long, heavy sigh, leaning my head back against the tile.

The day, which had started off feeling spacious and unstructured and almost like an actual vacation by Neo Avalis standards, was now thoroughly, comprehensively booked.

Mr. Shori for the morning shift, as per usual. Misha for the mask. A/so Misha—but as Ela this time—for the shard inquiry. Hairdresser as Sera. Then potentially also meeting with Valeria about the Mask and the Shard—depending on how things went with Misha.

And now *also* Rina at 4 PM, for whatever the hell *that* conversation was going to be.

'*So much for an open day...*' I thought, rueful but resigned. '*I really should have known better...*'