

Chapter 140 - Mixed Messages

The uncharacteristic silence stretched uncomfortably long, as everyone waited for Valeria to reply.

I wasn't sure whether Gabriel and Oliver had picked up on this at all yet, as my eyes were glued onto Valeria herself, unsure of where else to look.

Then, finally, Valeria's fingers tapped once against the side of her glass—barely audible, but crisp enough to cut the silence. Just as suddenly as the stillness had descended, she stirred, posture shifting with that familiar, deliberate grace.

Like someone waking from a dream but pretending they'd been fully alert the whole time.

Her head tilted toward Oliver first, lips curling into a sweet, practiced smile.

"Thank you, dear," she said, all sugar and polish.

As if the last five seconds hadn't just been her zoning out harder than a Scav on a mega-dose of Glitter.

Then her eyes turned to Gabriel. And the temperature in the room dropped again.

Her smile vanished.

Steel-gray eyes locked onto her son with a slow, precise appraisal that felt more like a diagnostics scan than a motherly glance.

"I must admit," she began, her voice laced with velvet and glass, "this request, presented in such a format and at this juncture, was not anticipated. Your historical disposition has consistently emphasized independence, creative direction, and a general aversion to systematized frameworks. To observe you diverge from that pattern, in response to what appear to be routine adversities, is... *disappointing*."

Gabriel shifted uncomfortably beside me, his shoulders tightening.

She didn't stop. "To transition into corporate infrastructure via referral is not a minor gesture. It is, in fact, a guaranteed onboarding opportunity that bypasses preliminary evaluations, aptitude screenings, and vetting processes. At EtherLabs, that level of entry—regardless of pay grade—is not extended lightly."

Valeria paused just long enough for her words to land.

"And what would you gain?" she asked coolly. "A low-level clerical position, likely within resource logistics or basic systems ops. No command. No strategic input. No independent schedule. You would be bound to the protocols, dress code, communication directives, and performance metrics of a system you have no leverage in, nor prior knowledge of. You would trade your current occupational discomforts for a different brand of stagnation. Safer,

perhaps. But no more rewarding—and this time, without an alternative path forward. Once you take a step onto this path, you cannot simply decide it is not to your liking afterwards.”

She leaned back slightly, folding her hands atop her lap. “The only substantive difference would be the shield of the brand name upon your ID. And even *that*,” she added, voice trailing into something just shy of dismissive, “has limits.”

Silence lingered in the air again.

But this time, it wasn’t as heavy as I had been expecting.

It was just... *lacking*.

Her arguments, sharp as they were, didn’t bite like usual.

They *sounded* right—structured, corporate, and thorough—but there was a hollowness to them. A kind of pre-packaged reasoning that felt more like a first draft than the usual verbal blades Valeria wielded with surgical precision.

And I couldn’t help but notice it.

‘Why is she so thrown off by this...?’ I thought, stunned. *‘No deep dive into his personal flaws? No long-term strategy? Just... the most basic rundown? What the hell is going on with her...?’*

I, however, seemed to be the only one catching onto this, as Gabriel straightened himself to ready for a reply, with none of the thoughts I had been expecting evident on his face—like confusion, surprise, hesitation; the feelings I was feeling at hearing Valeria speak those words.

His brows were drawn in concentration as he carefully collected his thoughts.

I could tell he was trying to thread the needle—sound respectable, competent, and just corpo enough to pass Valeria’s filters without failing to get his actual point across.

“I... I didn’t decide on this lightly,” he began, his voice steadier than I expected. “It’s a course of action that’s been under—uh—under personal consideration for several weeks now. I’ve weighed the projected benefits against the perceived drawbacks, and I believe... I believe the shift in structure would offer a level of long-term sustainability that my current position severely lacks.”

He fumbled for a second, clearly trying to corporate-ify his next thought. “Security, in both a financial and personal sense, has become a significant factor in recent evaluations. After the, uh... recent *incident*, the unpredictability of my current trajectory has only become more evident. I’m not dismissing what I have—but I’ve realized that a stable framework might be worth more than I gave it credit for before.”

He took a breath, glanced at Oliver briefly, then back at Valeria. “I admit that, in the past, I’ve been... *resistant* to the concept of this lifestyle. I thought of it as overly restrictive. But I’d like

to believe that I've grown since then. I see now that what I used to view as 'restrictions' might also be called 'foundations.' And I'm ready to try building on that."

Valeria didn't even wait a full second.

"I see," she said simply, eyes narrowing.

"You claim to have evaluated your position thoroughly, yet you seem to *discount* a number of support structures already placed at your disposal," she said, every word as deliberately placed as possible. "You are attending the Arkion Dojo—granted through my intervention, at *significant cost* to my social capital within that circle. An unparalleled opportunity, purposefully designed to shore up your needs for security in your day-to-day life. Additionally, your employer, by your own admission, has extended leniency and even promotion following your recovery, which—if the same parameters were replicated inside EtherLabs—would result not in a mere doubling of shifts, no promotion, no increase in responsibilities nor pay, but instead, a formal reprimand, if not *full* dismissal."

Each point landed with clean, corporate precision, the likes of which I knew Valeria for.

"A corporation, Gabriel, does not *care* whether you *enjoy* the role assigned to you. The metrics are met, or they are not. EtherLabs will not applaud your effort—they will *measure* it. And you will be weighed against standards you have not yet been exposed to. Your current environment, though undeniably imperfect, remains highly flexible in comparison."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I am not convinced this transition would serve you, Gabriel."

I blinked.

There it was again. That *pushback*.

And it wasn't even remotely subtle anymore.

Her words were framed in logic, sure, but the tone wasn't *right*.

There was no praise for his courage, no offer of mentorship, no transactional "if you want this, then give me that" kind of proposal—which was basically Valeria's whole thing.

Instead... she was trying to *shut it down* completely.

I stared at her, openly baffled now—not even bothering to mask the confusion that must've been written all over my face at this point. '*What the hell are you playing at, Valeria...?*'

And what made it worse? She didn't acknowledge this fact once.

No pointedly raised eyebrow at me. Not even a side glance or a single twitch of awareness.

That wasn't like her at all.

Valeria's whole *thing* was presence. Control.

Making sure everyone in the room *knew* she was watching.

That every word, breath, and micro-movement was under scrutiny. That was how she operated—constant pressure, subtle but thoroughly suffocating.

Yet here she was, sitting directly opposite the table, pointedly looking *anywhere* but at me.

And it was *definitely* on purpose.

Her peripheral vision was too good, her observational skills too sharp for it to be accidental.

She was ignoring me. Intentionally.

‘Why...?’ I shifted slightly in my seat, trying not to let it show that the gears in my brain were spinning like mad. *‘What changed? Is this some new kind of game? Is she trying to provoke me? Freeze me out before I even get a word in...?’*

None of it added up.

If these dinners were supposed to be some kind of high-society crash course—mini-corporate bootcamps for future suits—then Gabriel’s request should’ve been met with quiet approval, if not smug satisfaction.

It fit the mold perfectly.

So why the resistance? Why the sudden, lukewarm pushback?

‘Unless... that’s not what this is about at all.’

That thought alone started unraveling a dozen other assumptions I’d made about Valeria, about her goals, about what she even wanted out of all this. Was she actually *against* us joining corpo life? But that didn’t make any sense either.

She was corpo life. She was the damn *blueprint*.

A dull ache began to crawl behind my eyes—the telltale sign of an incoming stress migraine.

‘Great. Just what I fucking needed...’

I still had to make my own request. Still had to somehow spin my request into something acceptable enough for her to tolerate. And I had also promised Gabriel I’d help him as much as possible with his own.

But how, exactly, was I supposed to play this game if I didn’t even know the damn rules anymore?

Gabriel’s voice suddenly pierced my frantic internal spiral, pulling me back to the present moment with surprising force. He sat straight, chin lifted slightly, his voice clear and steady with a kind of resolve I honestly hadn’t expected from him.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done so far, Mum—I do. Especially the Arkion Dojo. But this isn’t about that, or me dismissing those efforts. I’m not making this request lightly, or

because I feel obligated, or to slight you. It's honestly because I *truly* believe this is the best way forward for me."

There was steel in his voice, a conviction I hadn't anticipated.

For a second, I felt genuinely taken aback by the raw sincerity and determination in his words. Had I really overlooked how deeply he'd thought all this through to this degree?

My gaze flickered back over to Valeria just in time to catch something that made my pulse quicken: She was tapping her finger lightly against the tabletop, a subtle, nervous gesture I had *never* once seen from her before. It was entirely soundless and barely noticeable—yet given my current hyper-awareness, it might as well have been flashing neon.

'*Valeria...nervous? What sort of alternate reality, hell-dimension is this?!*' my thoughts screamed internally.

But as quickly as the tapping had started, it stopped.

Valeria straightened her posture, somehow, even further, instantly reclaiming her usual domineering presence, as if nothing unusual had occurred. Her eyes hardened, meeting Gabriel's directly, and her voice was cool and composed when she spoke again.

"I am willing to entertain your request, Gabriel," she said, each word carefully chosen and delivered with precision, "though I must stress that a corporate life is not something you can simply dip your toes into to test the waters. Given the committal nature and the responsibilities it demands, I cannot—and *will* not—simply grant you an immediate induction into EtherLabs, nor a referral without certain...conditions being met first."

Gabriel opened his mouth, seemingly ready to jump at whatever conditions she might present—but before he could utter a single syllable, Valeria's icy gaze pinned him down, silencing him instantly. He visibly flinched, swallowing his words and lowering his gaze slightly as she continued, entirely unchallenged going forward.

"Instead, I shall prepare a place for you at Fenwylde Academy. Although, frankly, I question whether this will be a worthwhile use of either of our time, given your historical lack of appreciation for other opportunities provided to you in this manner... Nevertheless, the Academy will provide you with a foundation—a proper education in corporate etiquette, expectations, responsibilities, and culture. It will give you a far more accurate view of what you seem *so certain* you desire."

She leaned forward just slightly, narrowing her eyes to emphasize the weight of her next words.

"You will spend two years at Fenwylde, after which I shall reconsider your request for a formal referral, contingent upon your results meeting my standards. However, should your performance dip below a seventy percent average at any point during this two-year period, you shall be dismissed immediately—and any notion of referrals or further support from my side will be permanently withdrawn."

She let her words hang in the air, heavy and immovable. Gabriel was silent, and I could see him trying hard to maintain his composure, his expression conflicted but determined.

“And, of course, you will continue with your current place of employment,” she added, surprising Gabriel and myself. “I will personally handle the negotiations with your employer on this matter. Rest assured that it will not become an issue from their side of things—and I expect that it will not become one from yours either, Gabriel.”

Gabriel nodded slowly, his eyes flicking down toward his lap for a brief second before meeting Valeria’s again.

He took a breath, then another—like he was psyching himself up before a leap.

“I understand, Mum,” he said, voice quieter but still carrying that same determined undercurrent. “You’re right. If I can’t manage a job and schooling at the same time, I probably wouldn’t be able to handle what’s expected in a real corporate environment anyway.”

He paused, then added, “If things don’t work out... well, they *will*—but even if they don’t, I will have a fallback with the current job and I’ll just have to find another way forward. It makes sense.”

I blinked at that. It wasn’t the response I’d expected.

The fact that he’d taken her terms—harsh as they were—and managed to spin them into a logical, almost flattering assessment of her intentions like that?

That was surprisingly *corpo* of him.

Not smooth, not rehearsed or coming to him right away, but still *corpo* in a way that someone like Valeria might value. He was clearly trying, *hard*, to frame this in a way that earned her respect.

And judging by the faint incline of her head—the kind of nod that felt more like an acknowledgment than approval—it was working.

“Very well,” Valeria said, her tone clipped, but not displeased. “I shall make the necessary arrangements over the next few days. You will receive the onboarding materials and contact details from Fenwylde’s admissions by the end of the week. I expect you to begin preparations immediately.”

Gabriel nodded again, this time without hesitation.

With that, the conversation seemed to settle.

No more words came from Valeria. No more retorts from Gabriel. Just a mutual understanding hanging in the air between them, formal and cold, but very real.

I tensed.

I knew what had to logically come next.

Valeria's gaze didn't immediately swing toward me like I expected, however.

Instead, she looked away first, adjusting a non-existent crease in her sleeve, then took a sip from her glass—composed, patient.

When her eyes finally moved to me, it was without fanfare. Like she hadn't spent the last several minutes completely ignoring my very existence for whatever god-forsaken reason.

Yet when she finally spoke, her voice was smooth as oil, but just as sharp as ever.

"Daughter, much like with your brother, I have not received sufficient updates about your recent activities due to my limited free time in recent days. You will provide an update on them, will you not?"

It was a bit more of a request than usual, but not by much.

Having anticipated this line of questioning, I immediately provided her with my prepared answer.

"Of course, Mother," I answered, letting the words roll off my tongue in the most polished, corpo-adjacent tone I could manage without going completely overboard. "In the past week, I have continued to fulfil my responsibilities at Mr. Shori's establishment, maintaining a high degree of operational consistency during my designated hours. He has noted my reliability and ongoing familiarity with both the clientele and internal procedures."

I kept my posture straight, arms folded gently in my lap.

Eye contact, but not too intense. Controlled, measured.

Effectively: Mirroring Valeria as best I could, without making it seem satirical.

"In parallel," I continued, "I have been working to settle the debt owed to Mr. Stirling, as discussed. I have successfully reduced the remaining obligations to a single outstanding minor favour, which, according to his own words, he is currently considering voiding entirely. I deemed it beneficial to take a proactive approach to finalising this matter, to avoid future liabilities and maintain a positive reputation for our family name."

Surprisingly enough, I swore I saw *Oliver*, of all people, nod approvingly at that.

Valeria said nothing yet, simply watching with that trademark impassivity.

"Additionally," I went on, "my continued attendance at the Arkion Dojo has yielded results. Miss K has expressed moderate approval at my progression and has confirmed that I am currently keeping pace with the rest of the cohort—despite the advantage they hold in terms of pre-existing familiarity and experience."

Encouraged by her silence, figuring that I might not be off with my corporate estimation of her after all, I added, "In the spirit of preparedness and lateral networking, I've also secured the private contact IDs of all current class members. A minor detail, perhaps, but one I considered useful for long-term strategic communications."

That earned me a tiny lift of one of Valeria's brows.

I paused momentarily, giving her space to interject.

But there was no further reaction, yet no interruption either.

"And lastly," I continued, softening the tone ever so slightly to show a sliver of honest enthusiasm through the otherwise bullet-point-like report, "I've made considerable headway in integrating the SPG-01 shard into my broader development schedule. My familiarity with basic Netrunning architecture and executable logic chains has improved significantly. I estimate a foundational level of practical use within another two weeks, assuming current progress continues without disruption."

I had figured that, at this point, Valeria was undoubtedly in the know about my possession of the shard. Even with her being busy at work, as she claimed, there was no chance she wouldn't have caught onto such a massive investment from Gabriel's side.

So I left it there, folding the update with a respectful incline of my head—subtle, deferential.

From my left side, Gabriel blinked at me, likely wondering when exactly I'd turned into a corpo-presenting shark.

I didn't blame him.

The words had flowed smoother than I expected, but I guess that's what you got with some additional prep time and increased levels in Attributes and Skills across the board.

Valeria stared for a moment.

Then, ever so slightly, she gave the faintest of nods.

"Acceptable," she said at last, her voice cool, but without reproach. "It is good to see your sense of structure and prioritisation improving, daughter. That was... an appropriately comprehensive report."

Internally, I was throwing a damn party.

'That's definitely the highest form of praise I've ever heard come out of her mouth...!'

But on the outside? I stayed perfectly composed.

Just another Tuesday.

That little taste of success got drop-kicked into a vat of liquid nitrogen the moment her gaze sharpened and she followed up with, "However, I would like you to be more mindful of the frequency with which you leave the apartment outside of scheduled appointments and necessary obligations. We do not wish for another incident to occur due to needless exposure to dangers or, even more detrimental, a lapse into former habits."

My heart skipped a beat.

Just like that, the air in the room got thinner.

'How much does she know...?'

The exact times I left? The duration? *Where* I went? *What* I did?

Was it all just timestamped logs from the door's biometric tracker, or was there an actual camera somewhere feeding her footage?

I'd swept the apartment.

More than once.

Inside and out. No bugs. No obvious surveillance.

But that didn't mean something hadn't slipped through.

Or maybe she didn't need a camera—maybe she had access to public records, local security feeds, hell, even neighbour reports, considering they were all EtherLabs on this floor.

My mind raced through every possibility, pulse ticking up in that quiet, creeping kind of way as I tried to search for the perfect answer.

'How much does she know... and how much is she waiting for me to confirm just by reacting...?'