

Chapter 133 - Lessons

I was surprisingly calm, given the knife I currently had at Cryo's throat.

Adrenaline was flooding my veins, but my mind had never felt clearer. Cryo had pointed his gun at *me*—mid-combat—when we were supposed to be on the same team.

That wasn't something I could just shrug off.

I kept my eyes locked firmly on Cryo's, waiting for a reaction.

But the guy looked as unbothered as always, like having a blade pressed against his jugular was just another minor inconvenience. Honestly, that calm stare pissed me off even more—he should've at least shown some kind of shame or guilt.

Pina, meanwhile, was completely unfazed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her casually strolling off to the nearest dead scav, already searching for anything worth taking like this was just another Tuesday.

"Ya hesitated," Cryo finally said, his voice matter-of-fact, as if that explained *everything*.

"I killed him," I snapped back, venom heavy in my voice.

He wasn't completely wrong—I had paused for a split second—but I'd been fully aware of what I was doing, ready to react the instant the scav inevitably tried something stupid.

"Yeah, but ya hesitated," Cryo repeated calmly. "Ya wasted time talkin' to an enemy mid-combat, lettin' yerself get manipulated. Even if it ended fine, ya took an unnecessary risk. Put the whole crew in danger." His eyes bore into mine with brutal honesty. "I was aimin' at the scav first, Ela. Woulda shot 'im if ya didn't. And then I woulda shot ya too if ya hadn't fixed yer own blunder immediately."

The way he said it—like it was a *fact*, not a threat—sent a chill through my spine.

'I wouldn't have been the first one either,' I realized. The thought settled in my stomach like ice.

"But ya *did* fix it. And yer reaction at seein' me pointin' that gun at ya was spot-on," Cryo continued, his voice softening just the tiniest bit. "Ya were ready to kill me right then and there, no hesitation. Good instincts. *That'll* keep ya alive out here. Operators ain't friends, Ela, especially ones ya don't know yet. Betrayal ain't common, but it sure ain't rare either. Every week the OPN publishes a list of dead Operators—plenty of 'em ain't killed by scav, or gangers, or corpo goons. Nah, they're zeroed by their own crew. Didn't watch their backs, ended up catchin' a bullet."

Cryo took a slow, deliberate breath. "Ya passed the test, Ela. I ain't sorry for puttin' ya through it. Needed to see if ya had what it takes. If ya hadn't reacted right, wouldn't matter how skilled ya are—I'd never give ya a rec for yer license. Woulda been just another rookie

face disappearin' after trustin' the wrong Op. But the way ya moved, calculatin' distance between us, throwin' knives ready to fly the instant ya saw me gun... yeah, yer gonna make it out here. Ya did good."

I hated how much sense Cryo was making right then.

I really *had* fucked up, hadn't I?

Letting myself get talked down like that, wasting precious seconds on a scav who had no intention of ever being anything but the bottom-feeding trash they always were. If I hadn't corrected my mistake at the last second, getting shot by Cryo would've probably been justified.

Slowly, carefully, I lowered my knife, never breaking eye contact with Cryo.

My muscles stayed tense, still not completely trusting him after everything—especially since I'd just threatened him too.

Threatening your teammate wasn't exactly something you walked away from easily.

After all, once that line was crossed, what was stopping me from doing it again? Or him from retaliating?

Cryo was stronger than me. Probably faster, too.

I was painfully aware of how vulnerable I was in this moment.

My Intuition was desperately trying to get a read on him, but the guy was a Face—an experienced one at that—and he wasn't giving me any openings.

His expression stayed calm, unreadable, and it made me even more nervous.

'Is he gonna shoot me as soon as I back off? The second I'm not close enough to put a knife in him, will he take me out for threatenin' him like that...?'

My palms were getting clammy, my heart rate spiking again as anxiety clawed its way up my throat.

Damned if I did, damned if I didn't.

Cryo's voice broke into my spiraling thoughts again, almost conversational, despite the intensity of the moment. "Ya wanna know why it's such a problem, Ela? 'Cause we were a *crew* goin' in here. Everyone had their roles—yerself included. But the instant ya stopped to listen to that pile o' dreck, wastin' precious seconds on absolutely nothin', ya put Pina's life at risk. Mouse's life. My life."

He leaned forward just a fraction, deliberately putting his neck back against my knife. "The second ya hesitated, ya already put a knife to our throats, Ela. Try steppin' outta yer own head for a second and consider the situation: We're outnumbered, each of us takin' our share to keep things manageable. Then ya freeze up. Suddenly yer not applyin' pressure to

anyone but that one scav ya shoulda iced the moment ya had the chance. What if the other two scavs hadn't rushed ya? What if they'd jumped me or Pina instead? We were busy handlin' our own targets, trustin' that ya had our backs. But ya *didn't*—ya were too busy listenin' to some worthless sob story from a scav."

His eyes hardened even further, drilling into mine with brutal clarity.

"Did ya think bein' part of a crew meant ya only look out for yerself? That yer actions wouldn't affect the rest of us? Have no consequences for anyone but yerself? This ain't a solo gig, so why'd ya act like it was? Tell me, Ela—what would ya think about somebody who pulled the same stunt on ya? Someone neglectin' their teammates, puttin' everyone's lives on the line for a scav's sob story?"

My grip loosened.

Slowly, I let the tip of the blade fall away from Cryo's throat, stepping back a pace—measured, deliberate. Not enough to lower my guard, not enough to take me out of [Blademaster's Strike] range.

Just enough to say I wasn't obviously picking a fight anymore.

And still... I couldn't meet his eyes anymore.

The silence between us dragged, heavy as lead.

My heart was pounding again, not with adrenaline this time, but with something colder.

"I didn't... I didn't think about any of that," I muttered. "*Fuck*. You're right. I really, *seriously* fucked up."

The words felt bitter in my throat.

I'd gone into this whole op thinking I could hold my own, prove I was ready. I had prepared so much for it all, worked my ass off for weeks.

But I had fucked it.

Let some scumbag's trembling voice distract me in the middle of a live combat zone.

And worse—I had been the one to threaten my teammates first. Not Cryo.

Me.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words barely audible. "It won't happen again. I promise."

But even as I said it, I knew it wasn't worth much. A promise after a fuckup didn't erase the damage.

It didn't change the fact that I'd put the whole crew at risk on my very first gig like that.

Ten, maybe fifteen seconds. That was all it had been.

But in a fight like this? That was a lifetime.

We'd truly gotten *lucky*.

If those other two Scavs had changed course—if they'd flanked Pina or Cryo instead of charging me like idiots—I'd be living with a whole lot more than a bruised ego right now.

Or maybe not living at all.

And all for what? So I could feel good about giving a maybe-sincere scav a second chance?

I wanted to *scream*. Or punch something.

But just as my mind started that familiar slide into self-loathing, Cryo let out a breath and spoke up again. His voice had changed drastically—far softer now.

"Ya couldn't've known, Ela. Not really. This was yer first real gig," he said, tone even. "And ya did damn well, considerin'. Even with the blunder."

I blinked, caught completely off-guard by the shift in tone.

"To be honest, I figured I'd be cleanin' up after ya the whole damn time," he went on, shrugging slightly. "Thought I'd have to take yer load *and* mine. But ya handled yerself far better than I expected. Three Scavs, one after the other? And ya didn't just *survive* it; barely eke out a win. Nah, ya absolutely *tore* through 'em."

He gave a small, almost approving nod.

"Yer beyond green, sure. But what else would ya be?" Cryo said. "Ain't like ya done this kinda work before. But what I *am* sayin', clear as I can, is this: Ya sure ain't deadweight."

"Agreed!" Pina's voice suddenly rang out from somewhere across the warehouse. "That move where you side-jumped that psycho with the board and let him decapitate himself on your knife? Absolute cinema! Good shit, Ela!"

I blinked.

The sheer *tonal whiplash* from what had just happened to this sudden praise made my brain stutter a bit. My thoughts were still back in '*he's gonna kill me for real*' mode, and now I was getting compliments?

Still... I couldn't deny it helped. Helped a *lot*.

I had needed that more than I wanted to admit.

"Thanks," I muttered, trying to force my spine straight again, like that'd help with the churn in my chest. "I'll, uh... try not to fuck it next time."

Cryo gave me another long look—assessing, but not cold—before nodding once. "I'll call the client now," he said, almost like he was checking if we were good first.

I gave him a small nod. We were good.

He turned away, and I felt a spike of anxiety crawl up my throat, part of me wanting—*needing*—to keep him in striking range.

Just in case.

Just to be sure.

I forced that part down.

'He doesn't see me as a threat. If he wanted me dead, he didn't need to explain shit. Didn't have to give me that speech. He could've just pulled the trigger.'

I turned away, even as my chest still tensed up, expecting that maybe—*maybe*—I was wrong about him—just like I had been wrong about giving the scav one last chance.

Crouching beside one of Cryo's kills, I grabbed the scav's blood-slick shirt and started wiping down my RaZ.

It took about fifteen seconds to get clean. The same fifteen seconds I'd wasted in the fight.

I sheathed the blade, breathing in deep through my nose, the stench of blood and emptied bowels still heavy in the air inside the warehouse, then looked back toward Cryo—half-expecting a muzzle pointed at my head.

But he was just standing there, exactly where he'd said he'd be.

Quietly talking, calling in the job's completion.

I exhaled. Long, slow and controlled.

'At least I got that one right. Read it properly... The one that mattered most.'

"You should grab your loot before the cleaners show up," came Pina's voice from near me, making me flinch and damn near jump out of my skin.

"Fuu—!" I twisted toward her, heartbeat spiking. She was crouched over a body just a few meters away, casually rummaging through pockets and checking for neck-slotted shards like she was shopping at a weekend market. "What... What do you mean?"

She glanced up at me like it was the dumbest question she'd heard all day.

"Everyone gets the loot from the ones they dropped. Crew rule for when you run with Cryo. So those three," she jabbed a thumb toward the kitchen area, "they're yours. If the cleaners show, they'll strip whatever's left. You wanna make some extra Creds off the run, you better get looting. It ain't ever a lot, but it does stack up after a while."

Right. Of course there was loot etiquette. Why *wouldn't* there be?

Operators weren't exactly out here for the warm fuzzies or some kind of superhero fantasy—they were here for the Creds.

“Right, thanks for the heads-up,” I replied, nodding briefly at Pina before quickly stepping over to my three scavs.

Part of me was still bracing for that gut-twisting queasiness I had expected at seeing the aftermath, but as I knelt next to them, I felt... nothing.

No nausea, no guilt. *Nothing*.

The blood pooled around them, the stench of their bowels emptying once their muscles had given out, the almost completely severed head lolling limply from its neck, still slowly seeping red liquid—it all might as well have been splashes of paint on some messed-up abstract painting.

Just colours on canvas.

Without hesitation, I started rifling through their bodies.

Not gently either—I shoved, flipped, and yanked them about, checking every pocket or hiding spot that might have Creds, shards, or something valuable.

Their bodies weren't people—never had been—just containers.

Containers holding the one thing I'd actually want from this gig as an Operator: A payday.

Because Creds meant freedom.

Freedom to choose.

Freedom to do my own thing.

Freedom to start figuring out where I fit into this whole world.

Freedom to tell Valeria to go fuck herself for being a terrible monster of a mother.

If the corpses had been people, I might have been slightly more careful with their bodies—but they hadn't been.

I *fully* knew that now.

I had known it, then and always. But I hadn't *known* known it.

Intellectually, yes.

But being face-to-face with something that looks like a person, speaks like a person and breathes like a person? It was something else.

I had *needed* this experience, as much as the obvious blunder made me want to scream and punch things.

I had needed it to *truly* know.

Now that it was done? Their bodies were nothing but loot bags. Stinking, bloodied loot bags.

I went through all three of them, one after the other—checking every pocket, seam, boot lining, anything that might hide something worth selling.

[Appraise] made the job a hell of a lot easier.

I didn't have to second-guess every scrap—I could just ping it, get the readout, and toss whatever didn't pass the sniff test. Spoiler: Everything was junk.

Still, better to be thorough.

I found a Cred-shard on each corpse—total haul came out to 74 Credits. Like Pina said, not much. But if every gig tossed this kind of pocket change my way? It'd stack fast enough.

Checked their neck-slots next, hoping for some Data-Shards. Maybe one of them had a few decent blackmarket contacts saved, maybe some intel about *something* worthwhile, enough to sell to a broker.

But only one of them had anything. And *of course*, it was the guy I'd practically decapitated. My RaZ had cut clean through the damn shard, too. Snapped it right in half, clear as day.

*'Just my fucking luck... The **one** guy who had something potentially worth a damn and I turned it into scrap by accident. Fuck me...'*

I grouped back up with Pina a minute later, wiping the last bit of gore off my gloves on part of a shirt I had ripped from one of the scavs. She glanced over as I approached, eyes scanning me briefly before nodding toward the bodies behind me.

"Find anything good?" she asked, half-interested.

I shook my head. "Nah. Couple of Cred-shards, that's it. One of 'em had a data-shard, but... I kinda sliced clean through it by accident..."

"Ha! That does tend to happen at times, yeah." She answered with a chuckle.

I gave her a raised eyebrow, silently throwing the question back her way.

She just shrugged, already over it. "Ain't got shit either. Neither did Cryo—I checked his kills for him."

Without missing a beat, she plopped down onto the only half-intact piece of furniture in the entire building—a worn-down couch that looked like it had been dragged in off the street a decade ago and never cleaned since.

It sat directly in front of the busted old flatscreen, still on from earlier.

One of the scavs had clearly been mid-game when we kicked in the door, and sure enough, the controller was right there on the floor.

Pina picked it up, blew some grime off the buttons, and dropped right back into the game like none of this shit had just happened.

I hesitated for a moment, standing there awkwardly, not sure what to do with myself. My limbs still felt half-charged with leftover adrenaline, but there was nothing to aim it at now.

With a quiet sigh, I sat down next to her, not exactly comfortable, but not willing to just stand around awkwardly either.

A minute later, Mouse wandered in through the front door, brushing off his jacket like he'd just taken a stroll.

"Went as expected," he said, tone dry, almost bored.

Time slipped by after that.

I sat there while Pina mashed buttons, playing what had to be the worst game I'd ever laid eyes on. Graphics were glitchy as hell, the UI looked like it had been patched together by a drunk intern, and the sound design was mostly just grunts and weird buzzing.

True digital detritus.

But it gave my brain something to focus on while the storm in my chest started to settle. I'd made mistakes—*big ones*—but I was still here.

And I would learn from them.

Eventually, Cryo's voice cut through the quiet. "Client's people are here."

Pina dropped the controller with a little huff, Mouse stood up without a word, and I followed them toward the front entrance. But as we got closer to the door, I picked up on the shift.

Increasing tension.

Mouse checked the safety on his pistol. Pina popped out her revolver shotgun's cylinder and double-checked the load. Cryo calmly checked the magazine in his pistol, making sure it was full.

I caught his eye, confused.

He picked up on it instantly, as expected.

"Some clients don't like payin' up," he said in that slow, deadpan voice of his. "Easiest way to save Creds? Claim the job failed. Say the crew vanished, never reported back. Cleanup crew they were already sending in? Not just for the scavs."

He didn't have to spell it out any further than that.

Sometimes, you didn't walk away from a job just because the scavs were tougher than expected. And sometimes, it was the clients you should've been worried about all along.

Mirroring their readiness checks, I pulled out two of my throwing knives again, holding them in my off-hand—not that I really had one thanks to [Ambidexterity], but I still considered my left one the off one—ready to throw them at a moment's notice.

'Honestly been worried that my whole [Throwing] gimmick might be a waste of time, but... It worked out extremely well against that one scav earlier. Very happy to see that.'

Sure, I was nowhere near as effective as the others in the crew, considering they had straight up guns, but I could at least help out at a distance rather than just being deadweight—a win in my books, for sure.

Another minute passed until two SUVs pulled up and a crew of six jumped out of the vehicles, off-loading a variety of cleaning equipment, bags and crates with rollers before heading our way.

A lanky man led the troupe, his low-quality cybernetics clearly on display as he scratched his stubbly chin, and was the first one to make eye contact with the four of us.

"Eyyy... Operators, ye?" He hesitantly asked, stopping in the middle of the open, in front of the warehouse—if we hadn't been the Operators he had been expecting, he would've been beyond easy pickings.

"That's us," Cryo simply replied, already having put away his pistol. The cleaners had clearly passed the vibe check right away.

"Cool, cool, cool. Ye, ye. I'll... I'll let the boss know then, ye? Y'all can, eh... skedaddle, as they say," the cleaner leader offered and Cryo simply nodded, before stepping out of the warehouse, gesturing for us to follow.

We headed back to the car, still parked in the alley around the corner where we had left it, piled back inside in the same configuration as before—apparently calling 'shotgun' gave you the right for the entire trip, not just one-way, I learned—and Cryo started taking us back towards the highway.

Around a minute later, I got the System Notification that already spoiled me on what Cryo would be informing us about a minute later: Mission Success...

[System]: *Task Completed: Cryo's Scav Cleanup*

[System]: *You have gained 250 Character Experience.*

[System]: *You have gained 1x [Random Reward (Uncommon Table)]. Reward Claim Time Limit: 47:59:59.*