

Chapter 125 - Cryo

Walking alongside Vega out of the Downpour and toward the nearest set of elevators felt downright surreal.

It wasn't just the way every set of eyes in the bar locked onto us—Vega's presence tended to have that effect here, like a shark cutting through a school of fish—but the weird sense of full-circle that hit me.

All the weeks of chaos, close calls, and desperate plans had somehow led me right back here. Just a few weeks ago, I'd walked into this very same building as an errand girl, nervously clutching Mr. Shori's data shard like it was a live grenade.

Now? Now I was striding side-by-side with the man himself, treated less like a delivery girl and more like a legitimate business partner.

Progress.

Weird, utterly terrifying progress.

Not that I was complaining, of course.

Being seen on Vega's level, even loosely, came with a pretty hefty set of benefits.

The Clawed Beasts would be far less likely to treat me like just another outsider now. And if push came to shove—and it probably would, because when did it ever not?—there was a decent chance they'd actually have my back, if only to protect the investment Vega had just made by cutting that deal with me.

Mutual benefit was a powerful motivator.

Of course, none of that meant the Valir problem was even close to being solved.

If anything, walking through Delta with Vega at my side just hammered home how *not* ready I was to deal with her yet.

That woman was a monster—and not in the figurative, "oh she's scary" way.

No, the "one wrong move and she turns you into paste" kind of monster.

Even with Vega's resources, even with Citrina's talents and the rest of Jade's sisters, even with the Clawed Beasts putting their muscle behind it, the odds weren't great unless I leveled the hell up first.

I'd need better gear. Way sharper Skills. And maybe even some of the body modifications I'd been quietly considering—if I only could get my hands on some serious Credits.

'*Future Sera problem*,' I ultimately decided with a mental shrug, trying to focus back on the task at hand. '*Good luck with that, girl. You're gonna need it... We'll **both** need it.*'

Meanwhile, as I was busy ruminating about the past and potential future complications, Vega and I had made our way to the nearest set of elevators and he had managed to snag us a private one by simply waving around his authority a bit—definitely a neat trick!

Vega punched in the 5th floor, and as the elevator hummed into motion, his eyes flicked over toward me. For a brief moment, he seemed hesitant—like he was trying to choose his words very carefully.

“Look, Ela, I know you can handle yourself down there. Probably got a pretty good idea what we’re walking into, too. But…” He paused, his expression growing complicated. “I’d feel like shit if I didn’t at least say something: You might wanna throw that hood of yours up. Your hair… well, it’s not exactly subtle. Not something you should be parading around down there.”

‘*My hair?*’ I thought, confusion briefly flickering across my face. Of all the things he could’ve warned me about, my hair wasn’t exactly at the top of my list; or anywhere close to it, really.

Sure, I’d spent a good chunk of credits on the style—way pricier than anything you’d get out of an automatic haircut booth—but being slightly fancy shouldn’t really matter. Right?

But then again, I’d gotten to know Vega pretty well over the past few weeks, and the one thing I knew for sure was that he didn’t usually interfere unless he seriously thought it necessary. If he was breaking his general rule of letting me handle my own business—even with his usual spies and eyes around—then he *genuinely* believed something was up.

And that had me paying close attention.

The lower floors of Delta were basically a miniature reflection of the streets of Neo Avalis itself—only more cramped, desperate, and a lot more unpredictable. It wasn’t exactly a secret that once you got down far enough, the Megabuilding’s security became increasingly sketchy, to say the least.

The upper floors had their checkpoints, cameras, guard patrols and even automated defenses. The lower floors? Good luck.

Down there, it was practically lawless, in the messy, chaotic way that only small-time scavs, desperate people, and occasional corporate castoffs could manage.

Nobody really ran those floors.

No gang or corporation wanted to waste the resources required to bring order to that kind of chaos. Too expensive, too messy, and definitely not enough profit considering the kind of clientele you could expect in the lower rungs of the Megabuilding.

If you couldn’t afford a halfway decent apartment on at least a low-double-digit level floor, why would a corporation ever expect you to be able to purchase their products, or be a productive worker, after all?

In some ways, it might’ve even been safer outside the Megabuilding, where the big gangs and corpos at least kept their territories *relatively* secure.

That was probably exactly what Vega was worried about.

My hair—bright, flashy, and deliberately attention-grabbing—was the kind of thing that screamed *notice me* everywhere I went. Perfect when I actually wanted the attention, but a genuine liability in a place where any wrong glance could spiral into real trouble.

‘Or maybe Vega just doesn’t want to deal with random idiots trying to pick a fight with us,’ I mused, tugging my hood down low enough to shadow most of my face. *‘Which... Fair. I’d rather focus on the meeting as well, instead of dealing with absolute blanks.’*

He gave a small nod, clearly relieved, and muttered, “Appreciate it. Really just here to point you toward Cryo—not looking to pick up any side quests today, if you catch my drift.”

He let out a chuckle at his own phrasing, and I offered him a polite laugh back, more amused by the fact that he clearly thought he was *hilarious* than the joke itself.

“Absolutely. I’d rather keep this clean and easy too,” I said, letting a bit of my Edge bleed into my tone without thinking about it too hard. “Probably a good call to not give anyone an excuse to start shit.”

Vega grinned faintly at that—one of those knowing, satisfied looks people gave when they realized you actually *got it*—and turned his eyes back toward the elevator panel as the floor count ticked lower and lower.

Moments later, the familiar ding of the elevator chimed, and the doors slid open to reveal the 5th floor—and immediately, I regretted breathing through my nose.

The smell hit me like a truck.

It wasn’t even that it was *bad*—not entirely, anyway—it was just thoroughly overwhelming.

A full, unfiltered assault on my senses.

Food from vendor stalls sizzling away on dirty griddles, the sour bite of trash baking in the corners of alleyways, the unmistakable musk of too many bodies packed into too little space, layered with the sharp tang of cheap perfume and knockoff cologne.

It all smashed together into one giant, sweaty, chaotic wall of *fifth floor air*.

There was none of the polished air filtration the upper floors enjoyed. No pleasant climate control trying to sell you the fantasy of “natural living.”

Down here? You got raw, uncut Delta living—smells, sweat, and all.

‘That’s definitely not something you feel when playing the damn game...’ I thought grimly, breathing shallowly through my mouth as I stepped out behind Vega.

Intellectually, sure, I had known the lower floors were rougher. Dirtier. That was common knowledge. But knowing and experiencing were two very, very different things, evidently.

"We're heading to a place called 'The Valedictorian,'" Vega said, his voice calm as he merged into the endless river of people on the main thoroughfare. "It's kind of a neutral spot. A connection hub between people from outside and inside Delta."

'Huh. That's some seriously good intel,' I noted, tucking that away immediately. Having a place where you could semi-reliably meet people from outside the Megabuilding could be incredibly valuable to me in the future.

"Got it," I said, loud enough for him to catch without slowing down.

Meanwhile, my eyes flicked around the floor and crowd non-stop, taking in the chaos.

The fifth floor had a distinctly gritty vibe—everything was functional but clearly worn down.

Vendor stalls cobbled together from scrap metal and mismatched plastic sheets crowded the main walkway, each glowing neon sign promising food or tech repairs sputtering unevenly, occasionally flickering out before jolting back to life or failing to light up sections entirely.

Larger stores and apartment buildings loomed around us, their rockcrete walls worryingly cracked and discolored, streaked with moisture stains, graffiti layered atop faded paint from what seemed like decades ago.

The people here matched their environment perfectly as well.

Cybernetics weren't hidden behind sleek synth-skin or were polished up chrome down here—instead, they were raw, exposed, and rugged.

Metal limbs looked functional but patched-up, joints visibly reinforced with duct tape and wiring bundles haphazardly secured by bright zip-ties.

Hair came in every possible shade as well, vivid in colour but clearly faded from neglect, greasy yet somehow vibrant—pink mohawks, electric-blue buzz cuts, toxic-green braids—all slightly dulled under a general layer of all-encompassing grime.

Tattoos were a far, far more common sight here as well, from intricate tribal patterns snaking around metallic limbs to neon inked murals across bare torsos and necks. Piercings glittered from lips, eyebrows, noses, and ears, often mismatched and improvised.

Everything about these people screamed "make do."

They wore scuffed boots, patched jackets, and layered clothing that blended function with a clear defiance of fashion norms. They moved through the crowded space with practiced ease and a desperate hurry, eyes towards the ground at all times, yet the few conversations I could pick up were surprisingly loud and punctuated with laughter, cursing, or a little of both.

'Seems like despite everything, they still find a way to make it all worth it, huh?' I couldn't help but think with a melancholic smile at the snippets of laughter wafting towards me from one of the nearby food stalls.

Abruptly, Vega veered off toward a side alley, cutting sharply through the crowd—I almost missed the move entirely, too busy soaking in every scrap of detail this place had to offer.

“Better to cross through here or we’ll be stuck in the crowd for another twenty minutes,” he tossed over his shoulder, not even slowing down.

It was very obvious just how little he wanted to linger here.

Vega wasn’t exactly the twitchy type, but you could feel the tension coming off him like heatwaves. He clearly had zero interest in spending a second longer than necessary on this floor—and honestly, I couldn’t really blame him. The whole place had an energy that put you on edge, like you were one wrong look away from starting a brawl or getting pickpocketed.

Following him into the alley, we picked our way over trash piles that had long since given up trying to look like trash cans and were now just sad monuments to neglect and decay.

Broken appliances, smashed-up furniture, and tech scrap lined the walls, some of it so rotted and melted together that it was impossible to tell what it used to be.

The smell was somehow even worse here, a concentrated blast of rot and wet metal that had my nose wrinkling under my hood.

We shimmied through the narrow, cluttered path until we popped out the other end, spilling onto a smaller thoroughfare.

It wasn’t as jammed as the main one, but it was still bustling by any reasonable standard—food vendors hawking mystery skewers, impromptu gear markets with “genuine corporate-grade” parts that were almost anything but.

Navigating through this slightly less chaotic mess, we kept up the pace, weaving through crowds and sidestepping the occasional argument or street hustle.

After about another ten minutes, Vega turned off again, leading us down a quieter sidewalk tucked away behind a row of patchwork shopfronts.

“This is it,” he said, nodding toward a neon sign that buzzed gently above a heavy metal door. The multi-hued, glowing letters read **The Valedictorian**—and for once, the sign wasn’t missing any letters or sparking like it was about to catch fire.

Honestly, it looked almost a bit *too* clean for the floor.

“Cryo’s already inside. I’ll hang around until you two meet, then I’m out. No clue what he’s got planned for you, if anything, but from here on out? You’re on your own—not that that’s a problem for you, I assume,” Vega added, giving me a side-eyed look that was half approval, half warning.

I would’ve preferred if Vega stayed as backup, sure, but this was just one of those things you had to handle solo—kind of like your first day at school.

“Yeah, I’ll manage,” I said, putting on my best fake-confident nod.

Seeing that neon sign flickering steady above the door, however, sent a whole flock of nerves fluttering in my stomach.

No more prep. No more theory. This was it.

And without wasting any time, Vega stepped forward, yanked the heavy door open, and gestured for me to head inside.

Stepping inside, the very first thing that immediately hit me—and this time, it was actually a good thing—was how quickly the overwhelming smell from outside disappeared.

It was completely drowned out by the heavy scent of alcohol that permeated the entire bar.

It was almost comforting to see that even in this world, bars had that distinct bar-like smell, in a weird, slightly messed-up way.

Large glasses of beer, home-distilled liquor, and an impressive array of vibrantly coloured cocktails cluttered almost every table around the centrally placed bar, the glasses glittering invitingly under the low-hanging neon lights.

The Valedictorian was arranged like a wheel, with the circular bar sitting squarely at its hub.

Tables spiraled outward, thoughtfully placed to ensure easy access to drinks no matter where you sat. Along the outer edges, booths lined the walls, offering spots for quieter, more private conversations.

Compared to the Downpour, which doubled as a half-bar, half-club, this place was purely for drinking and socializing—no open spaces that doubled as dance floors or DJ stands. The only hint of alternative entertainment came from a solitary jukebox, its flights flickering softly near an old-school karaoke stage positioned by the emergency exit, ready to host whoever was brave—or drunk—enough to grab the microphone.

Vega stepped past me, giving a subtle nod toward one of the booths near the back, away from prying eyes, before heading there.

I followed close behind him, weaving through the tables and clusters of people.

A few patrons glanced up as we passed—more out of curiosity than anything else. I caught a few lingering stares here and there, but nobody looked like they wanted to pick a fight, and luckily, nobody made a move to get in our way either.

The bar was alive with the low hum of conversation, clinking glasses, and the occasional burst of laughter from one of the booths. Not loud and boisterous, but relaxed and conversational. It wasn't exactly cozy, but it had a kind of rough-around-the-edges charm that made it feel... *honest*, in a way that I hadn't quite seen replicated by the upper floors.

Vega, meanwhile, led me toward the outer wall, moving through the buzz of the room with the same fluid ease as always.

About two-thirds of the way there, he slowed, then came to a stop next to one of the more shadowed booths tucked into the corner.

Without missing a beat, he jerked his chin toward it.

“He’s in there. This is where I leave you, Ela,” he said, voice low and even.

I blinked, a little surprised that he wasn’t at least planning to stick around for introductions, but quickly caught myself.

Vega wasn’t the hand-holding type. Never had been.

“Thanks, Vega,” I gave him a short nod. “I appreciate it.”

He returned the nod, a flicker of something unreadable passing over his face, before he turned on his heel and made his way back toward the exit without another word, disappearing into the crowd like he had never been there at all.

I took a second to center myself, drawing a slow breath through my nose, letting it out through my mouth.

One last mental run-through of my plans, my options, my fallback ideas—then I stepped forward, closing the last few feet to the booth and giving the divider a firm knock.

A faint *click* sounded, and the divider slid back into the wall with a smooth hiss, revealing the booth’s interior. It was decently sized, built to hold four people comfortably, but there was only one occupant waiting for me.

“Vega sent me,” I said evenly, keeping my words guarded. No point dropping more information than necessary if this wasn’t actually the guy.

If this was the wrong booth after all and I accidentally pissed somebody off... Well, that was Vega’s problem to fix.

The man leaned back casually, lifting a heavy glass of beer in a lazy sort of toast.

“Ya must be the girl,” he said, voice rough around the edges but not unfriendly. “Come on in, then. Don’t let the good air out.”

Relief loosened something in my chest I hadn’t realized was that tight.

‘Right booth after all...’

I slid into the seat across from him, the divider sealing shut behind me with another quiet hiss, and immediately understood what he meant about the air.

A soft blast of chilled, filtered air greeted me—actual air conditioning, tucked somewhere in the booth. After the olfactory battlefield outside, it felt like stepping into a five-star hotel.

Dropping my backpack carefully onto the floor beside me, I shifted into a comfortable position and turned my attention fully to Cryo.

Now that I wasn't trying to fight through a wall of smells, noise and nerves, I could get a better read on him.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties, though it was hard to tell for sure under the web of small cybernetic enhancements laced into his skin that even covered parts of his face. His hair was cut short and uneven, like he didn't trust a machine to do it but also didn't really care enough to get it fixed properly.

His right arm was pure, rough-edged blue-tinted metal, not the polished, corporate-grade chrome you'd see higher up in the tower—this was functional, heavy-duty gear made for use, not looks.

He wore a simple, rugged jacket over what looked like flexible armored mesh—subtle, but it screamed "Operator" to anyone who knew what to look for.

His eyes, though, were what caught me the most: Clear, sharp, and calculating, like he was already twenty moves into whatever conversation we were about to have.

This was *definitely* Cryo.

"Yer a bit of an odd one, aren't ya?" he finally offered, breaking the minute of taut silence that had been building between us. "Name's Cryo, by the way. Not sure if Vega bothered to mention it—the old sleazebag."

Not exactly sure what to make of that first part, I decided it was safer to just let it slide.

"He did mention it. My name's Ela. Pleasure to meet you, Cryo," I replied, keeping my voice polite but guarded—still aiming for friendly enough without giving too much away.

Cryo let out a gravelly chuckle, raising his glass of beer—sweating heavily from the ice-cold liquid inside—and taking a long sip before continuing.

"Well, guess he trusts ya more than he trusts me," he said with a lopsided smirk. "All he told me was that he wanted me to meet someone 'cause they were interested in the Operator business. That's about the long and short of it. That at least right?"

I gave a small nod.

"*Why?*" he shot back instantly, no hesitation, leaning back against the cushioned wall like he had all the time in the world. "I can tell just from lookin' at ya—yer not desperate. Too fresh-faced, too good a kit. And ya sure as hell don't twitch like a Dragonchaser. Yer too steady for that."

He gave me a look that said he was genuinely curious now, not just making conversation.

"So what's yer angle, girl? Why dive into this whole shitstorm of a life?"

My ears pricked up a little at the term *Dragonchaser*.

They were the Edgerunners of Neon Dragons—reckless, fame-chasing maniacs who lived on the bleeding edge, chasing bigger, badder Tasks until either glory or death caught up with them.

Hell, the main character of the game had worn that label like a badge of honor.

Me? I wasn't about that life.

I didn't want fame. I didn't want my name flashing in neon.

I wanted experience. I wanted Skills. And more than anything else, I wanted Creds—the only real currency that could actually buy a slice of freedom around here.

"I need Creds and connections," I said after a brief pause, keeping my voice even and steady. This was one of the answers I had rehearsed ahead of time. "Can't stay locked up in Delta forever. But I'm not walking out without a few safety nets first."

Cryo gave a small, knowing nod before leaning forward slightly, the cushioned bench creaking under the shift in weight. "Take off the hood, girl. Let's have a proper conversation then."

Only now did I realize I had kept the damn thing on this whole time. I forced myself not to fidget, not to rush, and instead slowly pulled the hood down, keeping my movements casual.

When I met Cryo's gaze, I caught the subtle shift—his eyes widened, just a bit, and a slow smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Ohhh... Now *that's* interesting. Corpo-girl turned Operator, huh?" he mused, taking another lazy sip from his drink. "Running away from yer parents, then? Makes a lot more sense... But that's not all, is it?"

He let the thought hang in the air, humming thoughtfully, watching me like a hawk sizing up a wounded mouse.

I stayed quiet, letting him run with his assumptions—working off people's bad guesses had gotten me all the way here with Jade and Vega, no reason to switch strategies now.

But then Cryo said something that made my stomach knot up instantly.

"Ya killed someone. Quite recently, too. Didn't ya...?"