

Chapter 135 - Induction

Shaking off the moment of awe, I followed Cryo and crew through the double doors that opened before us without as much as a sound.

The air inside hit different—cool and sterile, but with the faintest undertone of filtered ozone and something floral, like a subtle diffuser had been going non-stop in the vents. The lighting was soft, a bit too perfect, like it had been calibrated to relax the nerves without you even realizing it.

I stepped into the space fully and had to admit—this didn't *feel* like a mercenary hub or some kind of cutthroat contract office.

No, this felt more like a high-end bank. Or maybe a private finance firm that just so happened to traffic in bloodshed instead of money.

The floor stretched wide, a dark stone-like material that absorbed the light without making it dim.

On either side of the open room were sleek, floor-to-ceiling privacy booths—around a dozen of them total, each with a recessed holo-sign above reading either **ENGAGED** or **AVAILABLE** in sharp, color-coded text. A few were already taken, with clients presumably laying out contract details with whatever OPN clerks were handling them.

Despite there being maybe twenty, thirty people drifting around—all of them clients, from what I could tell at a glance—it was eerily quiet.

No one spoke loudly. No phones rang. No arguments broke out.

Just low murmurs, soft footfalls, the occasional beep of an interface, and the whisper-hum of the environmental systems keeping everything precisely comfortable.

The kind of silence that felt *managed*. Downright engineered, even.

Cryo didn't slow down, just kept walking toward the left-hand corridor like he knew the place in his sleep.

Which, honestly, he probably did.

"This here's the front-facin' office of the OPN," he said without turning, his voice low and steady as always. "What the clients see. They come in, talk contracts, maybe catch a glimpse of a few of us walkin' around lookin' scary. Makes 'em feel like they're dealin' with professionals. Like they got access to somethin' real exclusive or whatever."

He gave a faint, dry snort. "There's a side-entrance at the back, of course. But the higher-ups like to tell us to use the front. Makes it look like we, the Operators, are approachable or somethin' like that. *Client-first image*, or whatever slogan they're pushin' this week."

The way he said it made it *very* clear he didn't buy into any of it.

He followed the rules, sure. Played along.

But there was no illusion in his tone that any of this polished bullshit meant anything in the long run to him.

Still, he didn't argue it either. He just walked the walk. Efficient apathy, in a way.

'No point in picking a fight with a big ol' room, I guess.'

I kept close behind Cryo, eyes drifting across the space, trying to soak in every detail.

Layout, faces, body language—anything that might clue me into the kind of place this really was beneath the polish. Because this wasn't just some swanky lobby—it was *deliberate*.

Everything felt calculated. The lighting was warm but not cozy.

The silence wasn't peaceful—it was *curated*.

Even the receptionist's smile looked like it had gone through corporate training modules.

'If I didn't know any better, I'd swear we just stepped into a Corpo HQ...' I thought, unease prickling at the back of my neck. *'Way too sterile. Way too perfect. The OPN in the game never felt like this. Not even close...'*

In the game, the few times you *did* step into the front-facing OPN offices, it was usually just a pit stop: Walk in, pick up a quest, walk out. No creepy silence. No atmosphere that made your skin feel like it was being politely judged. And it definitely hadn't looked this... *sanitized*.

The kind of place that made you instinctively check if your boots were too dirty.

'Maybe the devs just glossed over this part. Or maybe... the OPN changed their image after at some point before the game's start date...? Some sort of PR overhaul? New execs?' I didn't have any solid theories, and chasing after what-ifs without real intel wasn't gonna get me anywhere right now.

Just something to keep in mind for later, I figured.

Cryo didn't break stride, weaving past the sleek counters like he'd done this a thousand times. When we hit the next checkpoint, a soft pulse of blue light swept over him, scanning him for god knows what. Whatever it checked, however, it liked what it saw, because the inner doors clicked open a second later.

Two more steps, and we were through a set of heavy, reinforced double-doors—no neon, no fake polish, no smiles.

This was the real OPN: The back rooms.

Immediately, a wall of noise hit us head-on, shattering the eerie silence from moments earlier. Some heavy synthcore track pulsed through the air, its rhythmic bass vibrating in my

chest, mixing freely with bursts of laughter, overlapping conversations, and the occasional cheer erupting from random directions.

Compared to the clinical sterility of the lobby, this was like stepping into a different world entirely.

The smell alone almost overwhelmed me—booze hung thick in the air, alongside flavored synth-vapes leaving faint clouds of fruity or minty residue. Beneath it all was the unmistakable scent of sweat, left-over adrenaline from recent gigs, and just people being *people*.

The room itself was shaped around a large, circular bar occupying center-stage, bathed in soft, multi-colored lights.

Bartenders danced fluidly around each other, mixing drinks with practiced ease for the countless Operators crowding the stools and leaning against the polished counters.

Around the bar, scattered throughout the room, were dozens of booths of varying sizes and designs. Some were open, filled with groups animatedly sharing stories or planning their next gig, while others were concealed behind hazy privacy fields, shadowy silhouettes shifting behind them.

My eyes darted all over the place, trying to keep up.

Everyone here had a *look*—cybernetics out on display, some subtle, some not even trying to be. Vibrant hair colors lit up the room like a half-melted neon sign. Shaved patterns, metallic inlays, glowing tattoos. One guy had cables coiled like dreadlocks, another had full-on chromed arms that clicked and rattled like a snake whenever he moved.

The equipment alone could've stocked a mid-tier militia.

There was also a random stage in the far corner.

Karaoke.

Two Operators were up there, absolutely *destroying*—in the worst way possible—a song I'd never heard before. One was belting out lyrics like his vocal cords were made of gravel and trauma, while the other just screamed occasionally and played air guitar with a shock-baton.

The audience didn't care. They cheered louder anyway.

The whole experience was loud, messy and thoroughly chaotic.

And somehow, despite everything telling me I didn't belong in a place like this yet... it felt unmistakably *homey*.

'Hard not to, considering how many hours of content I watched of players literally sitting in an OPN back room just like this one, huh...?'

Cryo gestured casually for Pina and Mouse to move ahead without him, then nodded to me, motioning silently to follow. I stuck close as he led me deeper into the bar, moving carefully around Operators who barely glanced our way, too caught up in their drinks and conversations to care.

He guided me around a partition wall towards the main counter area, tucked discreetly out of sight from the entrance—almost like it was deliberately placed to make sure casual visitors didn't stumble onto it... Not like there was any way for a "casual" visitor to do so, but still.

"Alright, Ela, pay attention," Cryo began, his voice just loud enough to carry clearly over the noise of the bar. "Ya got yer Task-board right here. Looks old-school, but that's kinda the point."

He pointed at a surprisingly low-tech board—just a wide surface covered with magnetic slips, each one representing a Task, arranged by their Star ratings.

It instantly brought a smile to my face.

It was exactly like the kind of quest boards I'd seen in countless anime and games, the exact kind of whimsical, nostalgic touch the developers had probably been going for.

Cryo noticed my expression and raised an eyebrow, a slight smirk forming. "Yeah, it's exactly as cheesy as it looks. Honestly, don't know why they don't just digitize this already, but ya get used to it. Some o' the old-timers seem to like it."

Without further delay, Cryo motioned me towards the task desk itself, a row of sleek counters manned by receptionists talking quietly to Operators holding task slips. As we approached, several booths flickered opaque, privacy modes activating with a subtle hum, instantly cutting off their conversations from anyone outside.

Cryo approached one of the receptionists who wasn't busy—a young guy with neon-blue streaked hair and an easygoing smile—and leaned comfortably on the counter.

"Heya, Cryo," the receptionist greeted casually, eyes immediately glancing over at me with obvious curiosity. "What's it today?"

"I'm vouchin' for a newbie," Cryo said plainly, tilting his head in my direction. "Lookin' to get her licensed."

The receptionist's eyebrows shot up in clear surprise, his smile broadening dramatically. "Well, damn. *Cryo*, of all people, introducing fresh blood? Never thought I'd see the day."

Cryo rolled his eyes with a dramatic sigh.

"Can we skip the theatrics, Almen? Just do yer job."

Almen chuckled, completely unfazed, like he'd heard that line from Cryo a dozen times already—and probably had.

The way they spoke to each other made me pause for a second, taking it in.

Cryo wasn't just tolerating the guy—there was an ease to the exchange, like they'd known each other for a while. Whatever passed for “friendly” in Cryo's world, *this* was probably it.

It was weirdly grounding to see.

Reminded me that Cryo wasn't just *Cryo*, the Operator, the Face of the crew, the one who'd practically stared me down earlier without flinching.

He was also just a guy. With history. People. A network.

Maybe even—*gods forbid*—actual friends.

Almen ducked away behind the counter for a second and came back with a slim datapad in hand. He flicked it on, then looked up at Cryo again.

"Since this is your first time, I'm officially required to give the rundown," Almen began, tone playful. "Feel free to tune me out or whatever. I know you know this stuff, but hey—regulations."

Cryo nodded, already tapping the counter with his knuckle like a metronome, eyes not leaving the screen in front of him.

"Alright then." Almen grinned and launched into the speech, clearly not bored of it yet.

"Vouching for a new Operator means you're putting part of your reputation on the line for them. You're saying this person's ready for *the life*—that they can handle gigs the way an Operator's expected to. Professionalism, skill, all that jazz. If they screw up, especially in ways that break OPN protocol, you catch some of the heat too. In worst-case scenarios, that means blacklisting. So... don't vouch for someone you don't trust."

Cryo gave a noncommittal grunt, still drumming.

"And—final bit—your vouch also decides their starting rank and what kinds of Tasks they're eligible to take on. It becomes part of their public Operator profile, too, so clients and crews will know who stuck their neck out for them. Which is why we ask that you be honest about their skills. No padding the resume."

Almen held the datapad out, all the legal stuff already pulled up. "If you understand and agree to those terms, sign here."

Cryo didn't even blink—just swiped his hand across the screen. It chimed once and then he gestured lazily in my direction.

"This's Ela. She's the one I'm vouchin' for today."

Almen gave a polite nod, but his eyes lingered on me a bit longer than was comfortable. Not in a creepy way—more like he was trying to figure me out. Like he was asking himself why someone like Cryo, of all people, was going out of his way for someone like me.

What made *me* worth the risk, for seemingly the first time?

And honestly? I wasn't entirely sure yet either.

Considering that I'd had a knife to the guy's throat just a few minutes ago—over something that, in hindsight, had kind of been my own fuck-up—it was honestly impressive that Cryo was still vouching for me.

Most people would've at least held a grudge, or thrown some passive-aggressive jabs.

But him? Nothing. Just all business.

"If you'd please state your desired Operator handle and area of expertise?" Almen asked, tone polite but clipped, like he had a checklist in his head he was running through.

I hesitated for a beat, not totally sure what kind of answer he was expecting—some rehearsed resume pitch, or just the raw facts.

I decided to just go with what I'd told Cryo back when we first met.

"Ela. E-L-A. That's it," I said, keeping my tone level. "As for what I do—I'm stealth-focused. Recon, infiltration, info gathering. Got a drone. Can do Netrunning. Do a bit of programming, too—got my own Quick-Hack already, planning to build more. I'm good with knives, up close or thrown. And I've had some time on pistols as well... That kind of stuff what you're after?"

Almen tapped away on his datapad while I talked, giving a small nod as I wrapped up. "Yep, that'll do just fine."

Then he turned toward Cryo with a raised brow. "So, which of those things the lady just rattled off are you *actually* vouching for, big guy?"

He shot a quick glance my way and added, "No offense, but new Operators like to oversell their skillsets. Try to game the board for higher-paying Tasks right out the gate. It's why we have this whole vouching process."

"None taken," I said, flashing a small smile. And I meant it.

It made total sense.

If you were desperate for work, padding your profile was the obvious move. OPN contracts could pay out big, especially compared to the trash jobs floating around for unlicensed freelancers.

And from the OPN's side, trying to protect their reputation and clients? Yeah, no brainer.

There were other networks out there, of course.

Ones way looser with their standards. Hell, some barely even checked your ID, much less your skill set.

And if you weren't tied to a network, there were always Fixers—shady, off-the-record types who'd hand out jobs to whoever seemed competent enough to not die on the spot.

No license, no vouching, no safety net. Just vibes.

And more often than not? Those vibes got people killed.

Which was the whole reason why I had wanted to sign up with the OPN in the first place.

Cryo looked at me for a long second—just long enough to feel like he was scanning through every single moment we'd spent together so far. It wasn't hostile, just... *assessing*.

Like he was double-checking his own read on me.

Then, he gave the smallest nod and turned back to Almen.

"I vouch for all of it," he said flatly, like it wasn't the biggest mic drop of the day.

I nearly flinched.

It took *everything* I had not to react. My jaw wanted to drop, my eyebrows were already halfway to my hairline, and I had to physically clamp down on my facial muscles to keep from looking like a total idiot.

'All of it? Seriously?!'

He had barely even *seen* me do any of that stuff.

Sure, he'd seen me throw a few knives and fight a couple of surprised scavs. But Netrunning? Recon? Programming? He had *no* way of knowing how legit I was in any of those areas.

And yet here he was, vouching for all of it anyway.

Even Almen looked caught off-guard, his eyebrows shooting up.

"All of it?" he echoed, clearly fishing for clarification.

Cryo didn't miss a beat. "She's one of the most talented newbloods I seen. Still green, o' course—used to runnin' solo, thinkin' in ones instead of squads—but the potential's there, no doubt. And she learns *fast*."

I blinked. *'What the fuck is happening right now...?'*

He kept going, as if this kind of praise was just regular shop talk. "We just came from a gig, matter o' fact. Dropped three scavs on her own without even flinchin'. One of 'em had some salvaged subdermal, too. Didn't slow her down. Handled it clean. No wasted movement, no panic."

And then, to really hammer it home, he added with the faintest hint of amusement, "Also dropped Mouse with her Quick-Hack. Like, *really* dropped. Triggered his fail-safe and everythin'. Was out for like a whole minute or two, longest I seen. Guy's still fixin' himself even now."

Almen's eyes flicked to me again—third time today—and I could practically see the gears turning in his head. He started typing something into the datapad, nodding slowly as if the whole thing now made sense.

"Well damn," he said after a beat, "I guess I can see why *she's* the one, then. Sounds promising indeed."

He gave the datapad one final tap before glancing back at Cryo. "Alright. I'll give her Rank 1, based on your word. Let her skip the 0-star slog. I trust you know what you're doing, vouching for her like that."

Cryo just gave a small nod. "Preciate it, Almen."

A soft chime sounded a second later, and Almen turned to dig around under the counter. He came back up holding something small and rectangular, then gestured for me to step up.

"Here's your OPN ID Card, Ela," he said, handing it over. "Not mandatory to carry it around, since you'll be added to the system in a minute and most things just work digitally. But it's handy to have for clients who still like the whole physical-proof thing. Or, y'know, in case you're ever stuck out in some dead-zone with no signal. Up to you."

The card felt lighter than I expected, matte black with the OPN's sigil embossed in silver on one side, my callsign and ID number printed cleanly on the other.

Almen turned back to Cryo, raising an eyebrow. "You wanna give her the starter spiel or...?"

"Nah," Cryo cut him off with a lazy wave of the hand. "Best if ya do it. Ain't no way I'd remember everythin' worth mentionin' anyhow."

Almen snorted. "Didn't think so," he muttered, before turning his full attention back to me with a welcoming grin.

"Well then. First off—welcome to the OPN, the Operator Private Network. Simple version? We don't babysit. No one's gonna hold your hand or force you to take work. We just run the platform, keep the lights on, and make sure things stay clean and professional between Operators and clients. That's it."

He tapped a finger against the license I was still holding. "You're starting off at Rank 1 thanks to Cryo's vouch, so you're skipping the whole Rank 0 probation phase. That means, officially, your ceiling is 1-Star Tasks—unless you're brought into higher-rated gigs by more experienced crews and the client explicitly signs off on it."

He gestured off to the side, where I could now see the task board I had seen curious about earlier. "That there is the Task-board. Every job currently available will be listed there. If something catches your eye, just grab the slip and bring it to a nearby desk with a service member—like me—and we'll hand over all the intel, comms access, and any follow-up you'll need for the gig."

He gave a polite little bow with a wink. I tried not to grin.

'Alright. Charisma stat maxed out, confirmed. No wonder Cryo tolerates this guy,' I thought, amused.

"As for crews—there's no formal process. You can work with whoever, whenever. But if you wanna go the official route, make a crew and register it with the OPN, we can do that too. Once you're registered, clients can assign Tasks directly to your team. Makes repeat business and building a rep a lot easier. But that's usually something you only do once you're confident the people you're running with actually *fit*."

He pulled up a list on the datapad and turned it so I could see.

"These are the OPN rules. Read 'em. Memorize 'em. Breaking any of these? It's not just *your* ass on the line—it's Cryo's too. So don't make him regret putting his name on you."

His tone hadn't changed—still friendly, still calm—but the shift in weight behind his words made it clear: This part wasn't optional.

I nodded earnestly, before taking a look at the rules.

'Yeah, looks like those are the same, too,' I thought, skimming the list and confirming parts of my earlier hunch. *'A lot of the OPN's still exactly how I remember it... just not the front-office part. That part's new... Or I guess old?'*

The rules themselves were surprisingly straightforward, which made sense, considering the kind of people they were written for. No fluff, no corporate double-speak—just short, punchy lines that didn't leave much room for debate.

- No breaking agreements with your crew—whether it's official or not.
- No killing OPN Operators from your crew during a gig.
- No killing OPN Operators on OPN property or within 100 meters of it.
- No killing OPN Operators without a registered Bounty-Task.

Simple. Brutal. Effective.

The most interesting bit, of course, wasn't what was banned—but what wasn't.

Nowhere in the rules did it say you *couldn't* kill another Operator in general. It just listed the specific scenarios where it *wasn't allowed*, which meant, by omission, every other time was fair game.

'Operator life's just as cutthroat as ever, huh...?'

There'd been plenty of quests in the game where you had to track down other Operators.

Some of them had gone rogue, some had pissed off the wrong client, and a few had just gotten *too* popular—too big a name, too loud of a signal.

And for the right price? You could always find someone willing to fix that problem.

They called those contracts Bounty-Tasks. A nice, sanitized way of saying “Here’s your next murder target.”

Personally, I wanted to steer clear of that whole scene.

Sure, the payout was good, and the infamy came fast—but so did retaliation. Operators who made a name for themselves hunting their own kind didn’t last long.

They even had a name for them: Hunters. Or Operator Hunters, in long-form.

Either someone put them down for vengeance, or they got added to a Bounty list themselves. And the ones who *enjoyed* that kind of thing? Yeah... not exactly people I wanted to share a room with.

Snapping back to the present, I tapped the confirmation box on the datapad, locking in my agreement to the rules.

Almen, cheerful as ever, took the lead again.

“Well... that about wraps up the basic introduction,” he said brightly. “There’s obviously a whole lot more to the Operator lifestyle, but I won’t drown you in info on day one. If anything’s unclear or you got questions later, just walk up to the desk and I—or one of the other fine service members—will get you sorted.”

He grinned, practically glowing. “But for now? You’re officially in. Welcome to the OPN, Ela!”

His smile was blinding. Seriously, it felt like the kind of smile that could power a small generator.

‘Way too much sunshine for my tastes,’ I thought, but kept it to myself.

“Thank you, Almen. I appreciate it. I’ll make sure to ask if anything comes up.”

Not that I expected it to.

Between Cryo, the crew, and the game knowledge still stuck in my head, I figured I’d be fine.

Cryo gave the counter a solid knock with his knuckles, nodded at Almen like he was checking something off a list, and turned to go.

“Follow me if ya wanna get paid, Ela,” he called over his shoulder. “We’re celebratin’—induction and a successful Task.”

He didn’t wait for a response, just headed straight for the bar.

I gave Almen one last polite nod, tucked the ID into my jacket, and quickly fell in step behind Cryo towards where I assumed Pina and Mouse were going to be waiting for us...