

Chapter 80 - Innocent Inquiries

After we finished patching ourselves up with the medical supplies, we all started to walk out of the dojo together, a light trickle of conversation accompanying us.

"I can't believe she was able to just... *create* minute openings like that," Jin said, awe evident in his voice. "Getting hit on purpose is one thing, but that...? Just what kind of a monster is Sensei?"

The rest of us muttered affirmations, sharing the same thoughts.

"Say," Tom suddenly broke the ensuing silence, "how about we all meet up outside the dojo and do some extra training together? My place has a large training hall we could use; make sure we continue to exceed Sensei's expectations going forward—I really wouldn't mind having that on my resume."

Kenzie and Jin immediately turned thoughtful, clearly considering their answers carefully.

For me, however, it didn't seem like there was any downside to it at all.

I would get more time training my [Martial Arts] and [CQC] Skills in a safe environment while also making more connections with people my age; clear wins all around.

"I'm in," I replied with a friendly smile, but as I did so, I immediately felt like I had just made some sort of mistake. Jin and Kenzie's heads snapped towards me, their eyes wide.

Tom either didn't notice or didn't react, simply smiling at me as his eyes flashed yellow for a brief moment, my cerebral link immediately receiving a new bout of contact information.

"How about you two, then?" Tom turned the question on the other two who had been hesitating. They immediately schooled their expressions the moment they realised Tom was addressing them, but it was clear they were tense regardless.

Kenzie's eyes met mine for a moment, and I could see something inside of them shift as she seemed to make a decision.

"I guess I'll join in—but if it doesn't prove worth my time, I'm leaving; no explanations," she finally asserted, meeting Tom's eyes. He simply nodded in agreement.

Jin cursed quietly before also agreeing, "Sure, whatever, I guess... Same rules as the fox girl."

With everyone having exchanged their contact information, we continued walking towards the nearest restricted elevators. I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed something huge in this whole interaction.

'What the hell was that all about...?' I wondered during a lull in the conversation. 'They looked super unhappy to accept this whole deal—is there something about Tom I should know about...?'

I took a closer look at the boy with the bionic enhancements, but nothing seemed off about him. That left two possible scenarios in my mind: He was some sort of known quantity in the upper circles of whatever society had access to Miss K's dojo, or his family was.

A cold shudder ran down my spine at the realisation. *'Oh fuck... I really hope I didn't just screw myself by agreeing to this; I don't know anything about corpo politics and families...!'*

My fear wasn't about what I might have gotten *myself* into, but rather how the corporate-obsessed person in my immediate family would react to it.

Had I just agreed to become friends with the son of a potential enemy of Valeria? Did I just agree to become some sort of accidental hostage in corpo politics or something?!

There was really only one way to figure it out without doing something really stupid.

"Hey, Kenzie, mind sticking with me for a bit longer? I wanted to ask you something about today's session," I lied as naturally as I breathed while we approached the restricted elevators.

The fox girl eyed me for a brief instant before nodding enthusiastically, "Absolutely! Maybe we can even go shopping or something? I could really use some new threads."

Something told me that the entire second part about wanting to go shopping was bullshit, but I was thankful for her immediately catching on—the girl was *smart*; smarter than me, I had a feeling.

As the others boarded their respective, restricted elevators and we all said our goodbyes, promising to keep in touch before the next dojo session, Kenzie and I lingered behind.

Once they were gone, I took a deep breath, trying to figure out the best way to phrase my question without sounding too paranoid; or too ignorant—after all, I was in the same high-class dojo as them, so I should at least *look* like I belonged.

Kenzie's sharp eyes stayed on me, clearly waiting for me to spill whatever was on my mind.

"So, about Tom," I began, keeping my tone casual, "is there something I should know about you three? Some pre-existing tensions there?"

I purposefully avoided mentioning anything about families or potential politics, as I had absolutely no clue what I had just walked into.

Who could have expected that accepting an invitation to some extra training could be this complicated?!

Kenzie looked at me for a few seconds, my Ego Attribute working overtime to keep my face as neutral as possible, before answering with a question of her own. "You don't know much about our families, do you?"

I was a bit confused by the question at first, since we didn't even know each other's last names. But then again—this was Neo Avalis. With the right amount of credits and the right contacts, there was no such thing as not knowing something.

I only had two paths forward here: Playing up the high-society corpo angle or admitting that I was, comparatively, barely above a street-rat when it came to corpo knowledge.

On one hand, I really wanted to be honest with Kenzie—I was seriously craving a friend, as pathetic as that sounded in my head. But on the other hand, I didn't actually know much about her and being honest could be all-too-dangerous for me right now.

Kenzie didn't strike me as the kind of person to screw me over if I displayed a lack of knowledge, but then again, I had thought Mr. Stirling an upstanding citizen as well—until he had turned around and requested severe compensation for what was, essentially, pushing a shopping cart down the aisle.

Ultimately, I decided to mix the two, but erring more on the side of being honest with Kenzie—there were only so many houses of lies I could realistically keep up and running at a time, and trying to build a friendship on an outright lie didn't seem particularly smart.

"I... I do not," I admitted, playing up my embarrassment a bit to add an extra layer of naivete. "I followed Miss K's advice on treating it all as entirely separate, inside the dojo and out. So I never ended up checking your backgrounds... Very naive, apparently. Everyone else seems to be way ahead of me on this..."

Kenzie's look turned downright pitiful at that admission, like she could scarcely believe how I was even alive with such a naive mindset. But it seemed to do the trick, as there was also a hint of affection in her eyes; the same glint I had seen earlier when she agreed to join in.

I internally breathed a sigh of relief. *'I'm glad I didn't misinterpret that look—she agreed to join in on all of this only to protect me, to not let me go alone, didn't she?'*

Taking a deep breath, Kenzie fixed her eyes on mine, making sure I was paying close attention before divulging the information that was apparently common knowledge to everyone except me, "Tom, or rather, Thomas Erius Laken, is the second son of Raphael Laken. And yes, THE Raphael Laken, otherwise known as 'The Butcher of Oldtown', CEO of Laken Industries."

My eyes widened at that—and not just because Kenzie would be expecting it, but more so because I actually recognized *both* of those names.

Both Thomas Erius Laken and Raphael "The Butcher of Oldtown" Laken were characters in the actual game!

Raphael Laken was the CEO and figurehead of Laken Industries, a supplier of all things metal and mineral, that also had some of the best 3D-printing tech on the market—the company was an absolute behemoth in Neo Avalis, ranking amongst the top 30 corporations.

In the game, he was both a high-level quest NPC but also a potential antagonist, depending on what storylines the player followed; more often than not, the latter.

Thomas Erius Laken, on the other hand, was a strange character and vastly different from the “Tom” that I had met in Miss K’s dojo.

In the game, he was an utterly unhinged bionic monstrosity; essentially akin to what a cyberpsycho was for the cybernetic side of body enhancements. He had long lost his mind to the experimental bionics that he had been obsessed with and only served as a major boss encounter in a variety of different storylines.

Following Raphael’s quests, you would ultimately put Thomas down after a vast number of failed attempts to revert the damage done to his body and brain; while other quest lines often simply had you kill him as Raphael Laken used him as an extremely powerful and dangerous enforcer, causing a lot of death and collateral in the meantime.

I had trouble reconciling the seemingly kind-natured and smart Tom with the monster that was Thomas from the game, but the names and family connection made it undeniable.

Just what the fuck had happened in the few years that still separated me from the game’s timeline, to turn Tom into that absolute monster...?!

Kenzie must have seen the turmoil on my face, despite my Ego’s best attempt to keep me calm, because she leaned in slightly, her voice softer now, “Yeah... That was just about my reaction too when I realised who was in this group.”

A bit more forceful and once again catching my eyes with her own, she added, “Be careful around him. You never know what someone in that family could be capable of, even if he seems fairly tame so far.”

It was somewhat humorous how on-point Kenzie was with her warnings, but she didn’t even realise just how far beyond what anyone would realistically expect Tom to end up as he would ultimately go.

“As for Jin and myself,” Kenzie continued, “we’re not nearly as important. Jin’s full name is Jin Mutsashi Hokanida, third son of Wakana Hokanida, Vice-President of Xanadu Enterprises. They’re mostly focused on Cyberspace as a whole; server space, apartments, interior design, security, the whole works. If you need to acquire something in the Neo Avalis Cyberspace, chances are you’ll run into Xanadu Enterprises at some stage.”

Pointing at herself, she continued, “As for myself, my full name’s Kenzie Valupina Molida, second daughter of Octavia Valupina Molida, Director of Marketing at NexusPulse Systems. They mostly deal with propulsion systems for vehicles but also sometimes get military contracts to help create some new rocket or another. I don’t really have much to do with the corpo side of things; that’s more my sister and mum.”

Kenzie ended her rundown with a seemingly nonchalant shrug, but my Intuition told me that there was a bit more tension in the movement than would normally be expected.

I was flabbergasted by the sheer amount of detail she had gone into and readily revealed to me, considering that I was technically still a stranger to her. A part of me wanted to see it as a token of friendship, to accept it as freely given information from friend to friend, but I was not nearly as naive as I was playing to be.

Kenzie wanted something from me in return, that much was without a doubt.

I did feel somewhat positive about something here, however, and that was that she had given me the information in good faith, considering that we didn't agree on any particular exchange beforehand.

Going first in an exchange of information like this without any real agreement having been made before was a big sign of trust, or at least, goodwill, no matter how you wanted to slice it.

One thing that still thoroughly confused me about the whole corpo politics on display here, though, was how each of them had even ended up as part of a dojo headed by EtherLabs and why they were in this megabuilding to begin with.

Surely scions like them would be able to have a penthouse in the city somewhere?

I could see Kenzie's family maybe not having the creds or influence to make it, but the Vice-President of Xanadu Enterprises? *Raphael fucking Laken*? How did their sons end up in a random dojo in megabuilding Delta of all places? Even if they were second or third sons, surely, there had to be a different place to put them?

Before I could really come to any conclusions, however, Kenzie spoke up again.

"So there you have it. That's the basic rundown of each of us," she hesitated for a moment, clearly considering her next words carefully.

"Naturally, I did check up on you as well, Sera," she held up her hands defensively as if to pre-empt any kind of accusation or aggression from my end—which seemed a bit excessive, considering that she had just helped me out, but corpo politics were apparently a lot more complicated than I had feared. "But I came up almost entirely empty; which... I will admit, I don't know what that means."

Her eyes met mine with a complicated mixture of trepidation, anxiety, and expectation.

'So that's why,' I pieced together the parts of the puzzle that had been this entire conversation as things fell into place. *'She couldn't find information on me that fit with her image for me—she is expecting another scion, but I'm just a random kid from the megabuilding. She wants to trade for intel, specifically intel on me.'*

The problem was, there really wasn't any bigger truth hidden behind it all—as far as I knew.

I *really* was just a random kid living in the megabuilding, who just so happened to have a mother that somehow managed to strong-arm me into the craziest group of corpo scions this side of Neo Avalis.

My eyes widened ever-so-slightly at that thought.

'Wait a fucking minute... Was this Valeria's plan from the get-go?! To place me in this exact group to get me to make contacts with these high-tier corpo children to get at their families?'

I could 100% see that being something Valeria would do, considering how much she seemed to be playing at the corpo-ladder angle whenever I had met her in the past.

'But no...' I refuted the thoughts internally. 'I was the one that asked her to let me go to the dojo alongside Gabriel; not the other way around. I asked her to put me here... A coincidence then? Or maybe just an opportunity she saw when I made the request?'

It had been fairly suspicious how quickly Valeria had agreed to my request and managed to not only gain a second slot at this, apparently highly prestigious, dojo but also in such a high-society group.

Realising that I had been silent for a bit too long, making the whole situation quite awkward between Kenzie and myself, I quickly asked a follow-up to buy myself some time to focus back on the current conversation. "So, what *did* you manage to learn?"

Kenzie let out an almost imperceptible breath that she had seemingly been holding, before a lop-sided smile cracked her face again and she answered, "Your name's Seraphine Vildea, daughter of Valeria Vildea and Oliver Vildea. Oliver works as a foreman for a logistics company called Rainmar Logistics, a subsidiary of FluxGear, a low to mid-tier cybernetics manufacturer. Your mother... She works for Ether Labs in *some* capacity..."

Her words trailed off and I noticed that she had been eyeing me closely, as if to gauge whether I would lash out in some way at the information revealed. It seemed that background checks like this, while expected to happen, were not something you *actually* talked about to anyone involved—I guess it made sense, in a weird sort of way.

Corporations had abolished all rights for privacy a long time ago, but they themselves were very much protective of their own private information. That would naturally extend to the people working under them, and the corpos themselves would naturally feel that their private information being snooped out would, in turn, be like corporate espionage.

After all, they were the corporation's property, in a way.

Kenzie's forehead creased into a frown as she shrugged. "That's where everything started getting strange, Sera. I... I couldn't get any information on her whatsoever, except that she works for Ether Labs in *some* capacity. I know it's a bit much to ask, since you don't really know me and all... But... I could really use a win like this; finding out intel on somebody that my families' connections couldn't get a bead on...!"

Her words were practically flowing like water now, as she tried juggling the corporate politics in her mind, with her own ambitions and the tightrope that was not making me angry in her mind.

"I'm not asking you to reveal anything secret, of course! I'm just... I'd just like to know, you know? You've been a bit of a question mark since the first day and I wanna know more about

you, if that's not too much to ask. If the information I gave isn't enough, I can trade other stuff, too!"

I was thoroughly taken aback by the drastic change that Kenzie had just undergone. From a smart, energetic, but dangerously calculated girl, to downright pleading.

It was very clear that this whole thing meant a hell of a lot to her.

Being put on the spot like this was exceedingly stressful, to say the least.

I had never been particularly good at politics, mostly staying away from any news about my past life's world's politics as well. There were too many angles, too many questions in my mind, that I didn't know how to handle.

First and foremost, why was the information important to Kenzie?

Just to show up her family somehow? Why?

I didn't know enough about her personal situation at home to really make any calls there one way or another. It might be that she was being treated badly at home, in which I'd, of course, love to help her.

But I had no idea if that was the case whatsoever.

Secondly, what did it mean that Valeria's occupation couldn't be found out?

Kenzie's family contacts had easily managed to figure out everything about Tom and Jin's families, so why did they fail with Valeria? Was it that Valeria's information was more tightly guarded? Or simply that Jin's and Tom's families were more high-profile, so basic level information like occupation and names were readily available?

And then the obvious golden Killjoy floating through the room: Could I reveal anything about Valeria without risking her ire?

If her information truly was hidden carefully through some means, then revealing anything about her would obviously go contrary to whoever was hiding the information.

Was it Valeria herself? Ether Labs? Some third party simply hired to do so?

Not to mention that, even if I wanted to trade information like this, I also was very well aware of the fact that I *had none* to trade to begin with.

I didn't actually *know* what Valeria did for a living.

So even if I wanted to trade; to help Kenzie, I literally couldn't.

My silence dragged on as I considered these angles and more, thinking about Kenzie and my relationship with her so far.

Had our blossoming friendship been real? Or just an attempt from her to get close enough to make me open up on this?

And most importantly: Did I even care?

Did I truly care if her friendship was fake, to get information about a woman that had literally tortured me and my brother because we slighted her?

So what if Kenzie potentially used the information to make Valeria's life a bit more hellish than it had been; that seemed like a very fair trade for a night of NeuroCorpse in my eyes.

Unfortunately for everybody involved, my heart told me that yes, I *did* care.

I wanted a friend in this world; a real one.

If the small tidbits of camaraderie we had shared so far in Miss K's sessions had all been a ploy—an act of sorts—simply to gather information, then I couldn't help but be upset.

'Ah. I see...' I realised as that thought coalesced in my mind.

I already *was* upset.

Kenzie had just put me into a position where I had to reconsider every single interaction I had with her so far and potentially from here on out as a whole.

A part of me enjoyed seeing Kenzie squirm under my gaze as I continued to ponder my answer. It had been too long for a natural, short consideration; and we both knew it.

She could see the gears working behind my emerald eyes and the fact that my Ego Attribute kept my face a perfect mask made her uncomfortable beyond words.

She had shot her shot and now could only wait on my answer and pray that I reacted in a way that was beneficial to her.

The power I held in that moment felt downright intoxicating.

'*Is this what Valeria feels like whenever she is at home...*?' I couldn't help but think, shuddering at the thought that I might be more like her than I wanted to admit.

Ultimately, I had to make a decision.

Considering everything I knew at the moment and all the potential fallout that I could foresee, I chose the coward's way out.

"Look, Kenzie," I started, my tone softer than before, "I get it. You need to show your worth, prove yourself. I don't blame you for that."

I sighed, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease just a bit.

"I appreciate your help, Kenzie; truly," I continued, giving a respectful nod as I saw her tense up a bit. "The information you shared is really helpful. I'll keep it in mind when interacting with the boys, and you, of course. As for trading... Let's hold off on that for now, yeah? I don't really know you well enough to reveal my family's secrets just yet. I'm sure you've kept a lot about your family under wraps too; it's only natural."

Kenzie's face fell slightly, but she quickly recovered—there was a hint of relief in her eyes that she couldn't fully hide, almost like she had expected a worse reaction if I didn't agree to the trade.

Despite everything, I still wanted to try and be her friend—I was desperate, I'm the first to admit that. But what other options did I truly have?

Jade had already proven to be a snake, so trust on that front would take a long time to rebuild; if it was even possible, and I hadn't met anyone else my age except the group at the Arkion Dojo.

I didn't know where to even meet people, considering I didn't go to school or anything.

Figuring that, at the end of the day, I'd be seeing Kenzie whether I wanted to or not, I decided to throw her an additional bone and, foolishly, be just as naive in reality as I pretended to be.

"Maybe another time though, once I know you better. I'd like... I'd like to become friends, if that's an option." I didn't even need to fake my embarrassment and awkwardness, fully realising how strange this sentence was.

'Who the fuck says that, Sera?!' I lamented internally but kept my face natural and slightly flushed. *'Who says "I'd like to become friends"?! Are you a fucking alien or something?!'*

Kenzie's surprised face was the only thing keeping the self-lamenting thoughts at bay, her fox ears twitching animatedly. "Ahh... Yes! That's fine! I'd like to be friends too! I promise I won't ask about it again. Thank you for... Thank you."

It was clear she had more to say but decided against it, the smart, calculated version of herself returning and rapidly pushing the image of the pleading Kenzie from my memory.

After a bit of an awkward pause, Kenzie spoke up again, "I guess we should head home, then. In case the boys ask, I bought a dress; a green one. Really accents my curves."

Raising an eyebrow at her, wondering what that was all about, she elaborated with a sly smirk, "It's my favourite dress that I have at home. In case they wanna see it at some stage, I'll happily wear it. Gotta keep our alibis straight, yes? Especially when it comes to Tom; who knows how he or his father would react if they knew what we talked about."

I could definitely see the logic behind that and quickly agreed, before saying my goodbyes and punching my home floor into the restricted elevator.

With the conversation fresh on my mind, I couldn't help but feel thoroughly exhausted.

'Fucking corporate politics... Why did that have to happen, just when I thought I could start working on getting a friend?' I thought to myself, leaning heavily against the back of the elevator to let the cool metal ground me.

Sighing, I muttered, "At least I'm done with corporate politics for the next few days... Time to get back to the netrunning grind."

The second I said that, I realised my mistake and cursed under my breath as my cerebral interface chimed with a notification of a newly received message.

[(Mr. Stirling): Next data-collection, tomorrow. (Information attached).]

It seemed that corporate politics, specifically espionage, was very much still on my docket for the next few days after all...