

Chapter 148 - Long-Awaited Talks I

Stepping into the main room, I almost froze mid-step.

The apartment was nearly identical to the one I'd lived in for months—same layout, same sterile furniture—just stripped of the small, personal touches that had made ours feel like home.

But none of that was what stopped me.

Valeria sat at the dining table, though not in her usual seat. She'd taken Gabriel's and my side, facing the kitchen wall as if keeping watch. Her posture was still perfect, back straight as a steel rod, but the faint tilt of her head gave her away—she was asleep.

The table in front of her was a mess of datapads, scattered like she'd been plowing through report after report until exhaustion had finally dragged her under.

Her left hand still curled loosely around one of them, fingers twitching every now and then like she might wake at any moment. Near it was a familiar black hand-cannon, the weapon lying on the table within easy reach.

She was still wearing the same midnight dress I'd helped her change into last night, its once-pristine fabric wrinkled and stained with caked-on grime and blood.

A flicker of something dangerously close to sympathy passed through me before I could stamp it out.

'She's been here the whole time,' I realized, my throat tightening just a bit. 'Working, watching the door... probably ready to put a round through anyone stupid enough to walk in. Making sure I got some uninterrupted rest.'

It was jarring—seeing her like this.

Not the perfectly composed, ruthless corporate shark who dictated every move of our lives, but something closer to human: Evidently exhausted and utterly spent.

And yet, still trying in her own way, to hold what little she could together.

For the first time, I didn't just see the monster who'd held Gabriel and I under her thumb.

I saw nothing but a mother trying to do right by the only remaining member of the family she could do right by at the time.

I drew in a steadying breath, forcing myself forward.

My steps were soft against the floor, but even that faint sound was enough—her head snapped up almost instantly, eyes sharp and awake before I'd even made it halfway into the room.

"Seraphine," she greeted, her voice still polished despite the exhaustion bleeding through.

In one smooth motion, she straightened her posture even further, somehow finding room to sit more upright than she already had.

For a brief moment her gaze drifted, unfocused, like she was looking through me into empty space. She was probably pulling something up on her cerebral interface, though with the stealth model she used, there was no way to tell for sure.

“How are you feeling?” she asked finally, her tone clipped but underscored with a strange level of warmth I had never really heard from her before.

I shrugged faintly, trying to keep my voice casual. “Physically? Fine. More tense than I probably should be.”

I hesitated, jaw tightening.

Silence settled between us for a beat, heavy enough that I almost wanted to retreat back into the bedroom. Then Valeria exhaled, long and tired, and lifted a hand in a small gesture toward the opposite chair.

“Sit,” she said. “There is far too much to discuss for you to be hovering in the middle of the room. This conversation is long overdue, and I believe it is beyond time we had it properly.”

Her words hung there like a sentence passed.

And despite every part of me wanting to stall this out and postpone somehow, I knew she was right.

So I did as she said and lowered myself into the chair opposite her—her usual place, now mine, while she occupied the one I’d sat in for months. The switch felt strange, like the whole dynamic of the room had tilted a few degrees off balance.

I straightened my back, pulling my shoulders into line, careful to mirror her posture as best I could. With Valeria, proper decorum was always the safest card to play; I’d learned that quickly enough.

Even now, after everything, that instinct stuck.

I didn’t think this conversation would be dangerous—not really, not after seeing just how far she’d go to protect the family—but sitting across from her like this still made my chest tight.

No matter how much I told myself otherwise, unease clung to me.

Another stretch of silence lingered, heavy enough that it made my skin itch.

‘Am I supposed to start here? Is she waiting for me to say something...?’

The thought clawed around in my head, but it didn’t feel right.

Valeria had *never* ceded the opening move to anyone. If she wanted this conversation to begin, it would begin on her terms, as it always did.

Sure enough, after what felt like an eternity, she drew in a deep breath—slow and heavy, the kind I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her take before. She lifted the datapad still dangling from her hand, glanced at it briefly, then lowered it halfway, her gaze locking onto mine instead.

"Your father and brother remain, at this moment, alive," she said, her tone even but laced with fatigue.

Air left my lungs in a rush I hadn't even realized I'd been holding.

"Gabriel's condition is... within projected tolerance," she continued, each word sharp despite the exhaustion dragging on her voice. "He is under EtherLabs care and will remain so for several days, perhaps a week—maybe two, before returning home. His situation is not ideal, but it is acceptable, given the circumstances. I have confidence he will recover to a degree consistent with the highest of expectations."

Her eyes flickered, just for a heartbeat, some shadow of strain slipping past her composure.

"Oliver, however, remains unstable. PremMed continues to issue updates to his work, all routed directly to me. As of the most recent report, he is still undergoing extensive intervention. His survival is almost assured, however. His long-term health, his capacity to function beyond that baseline..."

She let the words hang for a moment, before finishing, "Those are in severe question, as you no doubt recall from PremMed's preliminary on-site assessment yesterday."

The words sank in heavier than I expected, and I felt my chest tighten.

The idea of Oliver suffering some potentially serious, long-term consequences left me uneasy—distraught, even—though, if I was being honest, I'd barely spent any time with him since ending up in this world.

And yet, without him... Gabriel and I probably would've been worse than maimed.

We might've been dead outright.

The thought made me swallow hard, a bitter mix of gratitude and guilt cutting through me.

He'd helped in more ways than one—hell, even his support during my push for Rina's contact ID had made things possible.

Now, however, thinking back to that request and how much I had dreaded making it, felt completely absurd.

What good were scraps of Sera's past life, when the present was crashing down in the form of corporate death squads and war spilling into our living room?

Valeria's voice pulled me back.

She shifted slightly, datapad lowering fully onto the table.

“As for my condition,” she began, her tone still cool and professional despite the pallor clinging to her face, “I sustained multiple ballistic injuries. Several rounds struck my torso, but none penetrated deeply enough to compromise vital organs. I enacted field treatment—compression and injection stabilizers—sufficient to manage until formal care becomes available.”

She flexed her left hand once, briefly, before resting it flat on the table again. “I will seek proper medical attention after our discussion concludes. However, I prioritized ensuring you received uninterrupted recovery. I was not certain how long I would be absent should I leave immediately, and it was imperative you rest before we addressed matters further.”

Her voice was as matter-of-fact as if she were delivering quarterly reports, but the faint drag in her words betrayed just how incredibly exhausted she truly was.

“As for my right side,” she went on, her gaze flicking down toward the limp side of her body that hung dead and unresponsive, “It will be several weeks, perhaps months, before full remediation can be expected. No direct intervention is required from my end. It is simply a limitation I will need to adapt to in the interim.”

My eyes couldn’t help but drift back to the right side of her body.

It was uncanny, almost wrong, to see Valeria like that.

Her posture was still immaculate, every inch the corporate paragon she projected herself to be, but there was a subtle tilt to her frame, a faint imbalance betraying the truth—that half of her body simply wasn’t answering the call anymore.

Her arm drew most of my attention.

Nightmarish to look at, yet somehow oddly tolerable at the same time.

The skin was gone, stripped away during the madness of last night, replaced with a crust of dried blood and that thin layer of transparent bandage-spray—the same stuff she’d used on my cerebral link last night.

The arm looked like it *should* still function, if very painful to move, and that contradiction made my stomach knot.

But the way it dangled, lifeless, proved otherwise.

I thought of the serpent—how she had torn her own flesh off to conjure that impossible spectral snake—and my curiosity burned hot.

Just what exactly had that even been? What had that done to her? Why had it left her half-paralyzed? The questions lingered on my tongue, but asking it outright felt crude, even reckless.

She caught me staring—of course she did, as I had made no attempts to hide my curiosity.

For once, though, there was no reprimand, no raised eyebrow.

Instead, her voice was cool but almost inviting. “I will elaborate on that matter and answer any of your questions in due course. But first—your health. It is imperative that I have an accurate overview of where this family stands physically before I begin planning.”

I took a second to think, weighing how much to give away.

My healing speed wasn’t something I wanted on display; not yet, if ever.

But trying to fake injuries I no longer had was a fool’s errand, especially with her eyes locked on me. She could demand proof at any moment, and I’d be instantly cornered.

So I settled on a middle ground. “My status is... about as good as it can be, considering everything. My cerebral link is back online with no malfunctions or aberrant aftershocks. Physically, I’d say that I’m operational.”

I chose the words vague enough to hopefully give me *some* kind of cover.

Valeria’s gaze, however, didn’t waver in the slightest; not giving me any indication of one side or the other on if she believed anything of what I had just said.

Another bead of silence stretched between us, the kind that pressed down on my chest until I wanted to fidget or cough just to fill the air.

‘If only the System had a mind-reading Perk,’ I thought bitterly, holding her stare. *‘Would make things so much easier if I knew what the hell she was thinking right now...’*

Valeria’s eyes lingered on me for a few more moments, before she gave the smallest of nods.

“Acceptable,” she said at last. Then, almost seamlessly, she pivoted. “In light of yesterday’s... *events*, and your unexpected level of involvement in their resolution, it would be prudent to provide you with clarity. Consider it both acknowledgment and repayment for your efforts. That said,” her gaze narrowed slightly, “I will *also* expect clarity from you in turn. There are questions that must be answered. A fair exchange, in my eyes—an answer for an answer.”

I blinked, surprised at just how transactional she made it sound, though I supposed that was her version of being generous.

Honestly, it was already more than I’d expected walking into this conversation.

I’d assumed she’d interrogate me until there was nothing left and give me practically nothing in return, especially after she had no doubt seen me pull off several impossible feats last night.

This was... a far better outcome than I could’ve possibly hoped for.

“Acceptable,” I copied her earlier answer, nodding. “Fair trade.”

I leaned forward slightly, figuring that if she really meant to give me answers, I might as well start with the thing that had been gnawing at my brain since last night.

“First question, then,” I said. “That thing you did—the snake—and that monster he pulled out of nowhere. What exactly were those things? Because out of everything that happened, that’s the one thing I still can’t even begin to wrap my head around.”

While I had a hunch it had to be tied to Anima somehow, I couldn’t piece together much more than that.

The whole thing still felt like a massive blank spot in my understanding of this world.

Anima hadn’t existed as a mechanic in Neon Dragons—or at least not as far as I knew—so I had no point of reference for what I’d seen.

“Those are known as Spirit Companions,” Valeria said, her tone as calm and businesslike as if she were running through a quarterly report; as if she hadn’t just said something utterly insane. “Or rather, the Manifestations thereof. Spirit Companions are metaphysical entities—beings that reside in a plane adjacent to our material one. On their own, they cannot touch our world. To grant them presence, to give them hold in a physical form, a proper Manifestation ritual is required. And that process, as you no doubt observed firsthand, carries weight.”

Her head inclined slightly toward her ruined right side, the limp, skinless arm serving as a very real example of what she was referring to.

“Manifestation requires sacrifice. Always. There is no other path. For most, that sacrifice is something of themselves—blood, bone, or pain. For Silizia... *Venom*.”

She opened her mouth then, wide enough for me to catch a glint of two sharp, unnatural fangs. They were surprisingly subtle, but unmistakable when pointed out like that.

“To call her forth, I sacrificed the skin inscribed with her form, and I subjected myself to a venom potent enough to kill lesser bodies outright. That is the condition for her arrival, the ritual cost that allows her to cross into our world—temporarily.”

She let out a slow, tired breath, one that sounded almost alien coming from her, before continuing. “Spirit Companions are... difficult to categorize. They are companions, yes. But also teachers, allies, and sometimes—burdens. Some are ancient, others freshly born. Some possess power vast enough to alter the course of entire cities; if not the very world. Others are little more than echoes, content simply to exist as they are. And yet...”

Her voice tightened faintly, a rare edge of emotion flickering through. “Should a Spirit Companion die, part of the Soul tethered to it dies with them.”

My eyes went wide, my stomach twisting.

‘Part of your Soul goes with it?! What the actual fuck?!’

But Valeria pressed on, giving no pause for my spiraling thoughts. “Whatever part of the Soul is bound to the Companion is forfeit. For me, that was my right side. Silizia was not exceptionally strong, which is why I *will* recover functionality over the course of the next few weeks. Others are not so fortunate. The more powerful the Companion, the deeper the bond. In those cases, the cost of their death can be final. Oblivion, shared equally between bearer and companion. It is, by design, a pact of reciprocity. A give-and-take, with no exceptions.”

Her words hung heavy in the air as she finished, the corporate polish never once faltering, even as she admitted that part of her very *Soul* had literally been torn away.

I had nothing to say.

This was so far beyond anything I had expected.

I’d thought maybe this would end up being something like Mr. Shori’s [Anima Blade] technique—a flashy, one-off trick that burned through whatever energy Anima was for a single effect and left you winded afterward.

But a *Spirit Companion*? A metaphysical being, tethered to your Soul? Manifestation Rituals that required blood and venom and literal pain to call them forth? A bond so deep that losing them meant potentially losing part of yourself forever?

That was on an *entirely* different level.

I just stared at her, not even bothering to hide my wide-eyed shock anymore.

There was no way I could play this off as casual—not with my brain trying to rewire itself around this revelation.

*‘Neon Dragons was a **cyberpunk** game, no?’* I thought, my mind whirring at full speed. *‘Guns, chrome, corpo intrigue, gang wars... Sure, there was some inherent esoterica with [Alchemy] and demi-human lore in the deeper questlines, but **this**?! Spirit Companions? Planes of existence? Soul sacrifice? That’s so far beyond the pale, I don’t even know where to start!’*

I racked my memory, digging through every wiki page, forum thread, and speculation post I had ever read.

Nothing even remotely close to *this* had been in there.

And, of course, I cursed myself yet again for my stupid “no spoilers” rule that had kept me from looking deeper into anything past the progress of the playthroughs I had been watching back then.

Whatever this world I had been transported into actually was, it was starting to feel like the rules I’d thought I’d known before were being rewritten in front of my face.

I finally managed to pin one of my racing thoughts long enough to turn it into a question.

“How does one even get a Spirit Companion?” I asked, my voice quieter than I meant it to be. “I assume it’s not something you can just... *buy*. Oliver didn’t seem to have one. Neither did anyone else yesterday, I’d guess?”

Valeria inclined her head, slow and deliberate. “You are correct. Acquisition is... *challenging*,” she said, the word clipped and neat despite the wear in her tone. “The first barrier is perception. One must possess a minimum threshold of esoteric aptitude to even be aware of potential candidates. But perception alone is insufficient. Those aptitudes can be trained, learned and refined over time, after all.”

She adjusted her posture slightly, her left shoulder pulling straighter once more. “The true hurdle is the acquisition itself. To claim a Spirit Companion, one must defeat its lesser Manifestation within our plane of existence. Most aspirants overreach, and they die attempting to subdue prey beyond their ability. The process is... extremely unforgiving.”

Her gaze flicked briefly toward her own limp right arm, then back to me.

She gave a small half-shrug—strikingly casual for her usual manner—like she’d seen enough failed attempts that the outcome no longer carried weight.

“No Companion would choose a bond with someone incapable of offering advantage in return,” she finished. “The connection *must* be mutually beneficial. There is no merit in accepting anything less than exceptional.”

I nodded slowly, letting that sink in.

It made sense, in a brutal, almost corporate way, even if it was a lot more vague than I’d been hoping for.

Still, I wasn’t sure pressing for more was possible right now.

Valeria had been clear that this talk was a stopgap—just enough to establish footing before she went to get patched up and inevitably spent the rest of the day cleaning up the absolute disaster last night had left behind.

A full lecture on Spirit Companions clearly wasn’t happening today.

Almost as if to underline that thought, Valeria’s voice cut through the renewed quiet between us. “Now that I have provided clarity on some of your inquiries, I expect you to reciprocate in kind, Seraphine. Given our agreement, I believe I have earned a degree of candor from you.”

Her words hit like a weight.

I stiffened in my chair, my stomach knotting instinctively as I forced myself to meet her gaze.

There was no hostility in her eyes—just that sharp, assessing focus that seemed to peel me open and lay me bare.

I gave a slow, almost reluctant nod.

And then came her first question.

“For how long,” she asked, enunciating each word with that precise, corporate crispness of hers, “have you been aware of the existence of Anima...?”