

Intermission 1 - All-Hands Conference

PoV: Helica Adurin Passe

"I want them dead! You hear me? DEAD!" Carinola's voice shrieked through the room, echoing off the walls like nails on a chalkboard.

They'd barely been discussing the incident on the 38th floor for thirty seconds before Carinola—predictably—started losing her mind, screaming about her "precious son" being horribly maimed and humiliated.

The Golden Phoenix needed to exact vengeance, she argued, launch a massive manhunt, make an example of whoever dared to touch their enforcers.

Helica was already beyond tired of this meeting; which had started like so many others in recent months and years. The constant wailing about honour and respect was getting on her last nerve, especially because Carinola had that special kind of voice—sharp and grating, like a buzzsaw to Helica's ears.

And the worst part? They hadn't even gotten to the actual briefing yet.

No one even knew what had truly gone down, because the idiot had derailed the whole thing before it could even start.

'I swear, I'd be doing everyone a favour if I just shot her, right here and now,' Helica mused, her hand instinctively brushing the grip of her JRayoU pistol hidden beneath her skirt. The thought was tempting. So *very* tempting.

She let her gaze wander around the room, silently calculating how things might play out if she actually stood up and put a bullet right between Carinola's hysterical eyes.

'Mark and Jonas?' She glanced at the two senior enforcers across the room. They'd probably enjoy it, maybe even cheer her on.

Her eyes slid to Liliana, who was also scanning the room with a similar look of detached boredom. Their eyes met, and for a brief second, Helica's sly smirk turned into a full-blown grin.

'Yeah, Liliana would definitely be down,' Helica thought. The silent exchange was enough to confirm that her colleague was on the same wavelength—both of them clearly entertaining the same fantasy of shutting Carinola up for good.

But, as satisfying as it would be, Helica knew they couldn't actually pull it off. She and Liliana's gaze finally landed on the rest of the room, and it became obvious why.

Bunoiro, Hakamade, Erica, and Juroshin would absolutely make a big fuss—a headache neither Helica nor Liliana had any intention of dealing with.

And, of course, there was the big boss himself at the end of the table: Orun Darake.

The leader of the Golden Phoenix enforcers and second-in-command to their gang's elusive head.

'If only I could get Orun on my side one of these days... we wouldn't have to deal with whiny children like this,' Helica thought ruefully, turning her attention back to the chaos unfolding in the room.

"...two low-life whores! Two nobodies that have no right to exist!" Carinola's voice continued screeching, her tirade in full swing.

Finally, Bunoiro, in all his gruff, no-nonsense glory, had clearly had enough. His gravelly voice cut through the air, grounding the room with an air of undeniable gravitas.

"If they were nobodies, how did your son lose his arm? How did they beat an entire group of junior enforcers and walk off without a scratch?"

His words were sharp, and Helica couldn't help but smirk as Carinola's already furious face somehow managed to turn an even deeper shade of red.

"And even more importantly, dearest Cari," Bunoiro added with a disgusted sneer, "if they were nobodies, how did your useless son manage to lose one of our *whitelisted* guns?"

That last line hit like a slap across the face.

Helica nearly laughed at how brutal it was.

But, to Carinola's credit—one of the few things Helica could ever give her credit for—she didn't back down.

The woman might've been a shrieking harpy, but she had a backbone when she needed it.

"I had the recordings analysed *three* times, Buno," Carinola answered, clearly trying her best to rein in her emotions and sound composed. Even she knew yelling at Bunoiro would only end badly. "Our guys have *no* records of these two. Nothing! Not on any of our floors, not even outside Delta itself. They don't seem to belong to any other gang or corp we know of. So tell me, what are they if not nobodies? Are we seriously going to pretend random Operators are a real threat nowadays? We consider them people now; is that it? Hired muscle doing dirty jobs for creds? Please, Buno, don't insult us by insinuating that."

Now that *really* caught Helica's attention.

'Two unknowns, huh?' Her curiosity sharpened. 'Potential new Operator contacts to gather? This is turning out to be more interesting than I thought...'

Unlike most of the other Golden Phoenix enforcers, Helica didn't share the same disdain toward Operators. Quite the opposite, really—she found them resourceful, charming even.

And more importantly, they were *useful*.

After all, Operators didn't care about allegiances.

They could be hired by anyone, no strings attached. No need for a name, a face, or any pesky personal details.

A sly thought crossed her mind. '*Maybe I could hire them to deal with this screeching harpy... wouldn't that be something?*'

Just then, Jonas broke the tense silence. "Show. Recording."

His voice, as always, was clipped and to the point. The man was practically allergic to conversation, but his mastery of cybernetics more than made up for his lack of words.

Helica leaned back in her chair, a wicked grin tugging at her lips as she continued to observe the meeting unfold, playing with the idea of having Carinola killed; just for the fun of it.

"I concur, I verily believe that the information presented so far leaves much to be desired," Liliana chimed in, her voice lilting and every bit as melodic as always. It was the sort of voice that grated on Helica's nerves—a kind of high-strung, overly regal tone that dripped with refinement, like she was constantly performing for an invisible audience.

But that was Liliana.

Juroshin, adjusting his clearly ornamental, antique glasses—a fashion statement more than anything functional—cleared his throat as if to remind everyone of his presence.

"Given the current situation with the corporations outside the megabuildings," he began, voice measured and precise, "it would be prudent to focus on maintaining internal stability. I recommend a full investigation into this incident. Only *after* we have all the facts should we even *consider* taking further action."

Helica nearly rolled her eyes.

They were all just waiting their turn to say something, parading their opinions like they were the *only* sane voice in the room. Before more of them could chime in, however, Helica was saved as Orun finally spoke up.

His voice was as calm and level as ever, betraying nothing of his thoughts—his face just as unreadable. That was Orun for you: Stoic, collected, practically robotic in every moment.

If it weren't for the jagged scar running from his cheek to his collarbone—an angry, festering wound that never quite healed—Helica could've sworn the man was one of the Master of Sword's very creations.

Orun wore that wound like a twisted badge of honour and shame alike, refusing to get it treated, letting it fester in the open for all to see. It was a reminder, both to himself and everyone else, that even *he* was fallible.

"Carinola, sit," Orun commanded, his voice steady, but with a weight that made it impossible to disobey.

Carinola immediately dropped back into her seat without so much as a peep. No one in the room—Helica included—wanted to make Orun repeat himself.

"Now, provide everyone here with all the data you have," Orun continued, his tone unchanged. "We'll investigate this matter together and make a collective decision on the next steps. That is the purpose of this meeting."

"Consider it done, High Talon," Carinola replied stiffly, her eyes glowing a sharp yellow as she began sharing the data.

Helica's own interface pinged, a new window opening in the corner of her vision.

[Carinola Valir has requested data sharing privileges. Accept? Y/N]

She was more than ready to hit "no" the second the data request popped up, feeling like the whole meeting had been one giant waste of time and nerves.

'But then again... two unknown Operators in Delta taking out a whole band of junior enforcers, one of them armed, and the other being the firstborn of a senior...? If that isn't the kind of change-up I've been dying for recently, then I really don't know what possibly could be.'

With her curiosity piqued and a renewed sense of interest, Helica tapped "accept," watching as one of her link's partitions quickly filled with a barrage of pictures, text files, and recordings.

She didn't even bother looking at the avalanche of data yet—first things first.

Absent-mindedly, she let her ICE run a scan, simultaneously engaging her usual Quick-Hack protocols to check for any daemons or sneaky backdoors.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Carinola. Actually, no—scratch that.

It was *exactly* because she didn't trust Carinola.

Then again, Helica didn't trust *any* data she hadn't personally swiped and reverified at least four times. That was just basic common sense, especially when dealing with backstabbing enforcers.

As her protocols finished and, unsurprisingly, came back clean, she started organising the mess of data Carinola had so graciously dumped on her.

'Would it really kill anyone here to take a single lesson on data presentation? Honestly, this looks like the remnants of a fucking dump-hack in here; how is anyone supposed to get informed on a situation with this...?'

Helica shook her head, her fingers dancing across her interface as she rapidly organised the chaotic data dump Carinola had unleashed. With a few quick commands, she restructured everything: images were tagged and categorised, video clips synced up by timestamp, and witness statements neatly cross-referenced with relevant footage.

In under a minute, what had looked like a data grenade was now an easily readable, chronological breakdown of the event.

'Much better,' she thought smugly, admiring her handiwork for a split second before pushing the now-organised file straight into everyone's links. She didn't even bother waiting for approval from the others—who had time for that when you could just *make* everyone see it?

As the data forcibly injected itself into each of their systems, she could practically *feel* the mixture of gratitude and annoyance ripple through the room. Several enforcers shot her dirty looks—no one enjoyed having their privacy breached like that, not even amongst their own.

Jonas, predictably, just grunted, probably too busy scrolling through the now neatly-organised files to care. Meanwhile, Liliana glanced up from her interface, lips pursed, but ultimately said nothing, her regal demeanour barely hiding her annoyance.

Orun, however, fixed her with a long, knowing stare—the kind of look that clearly said, *"How many times have I told you to stop breaching into other people's links without consent?"*

Helica met his eyes with a cheeky grin, shrugging innocently before turning her attention back to the data. *'Old habits die hard,'* she mused, unfazed by Orun's silent reprimand.

Now that the information was properly sorted and presented, she scrolled through the detailed timeline of the incident. Everything from camera angles to witness statements painted a much clearer picture of what had gone down on the 38th floor.

The first thing that immediately grabbed Helica's attention was the camera footage from the front of the gun store, showing the two unknown individuals casually strolling up to it. Her curiosity kicked into overdrive, and she instinctively zoomed in to get a better look at their faces and gear.

'Huh...?' She blinked, taken aback by what she saw. *'They're just... kids?!'*

Helica had expected Carinola's precious son to have been taken down by some serious heavy-hitters—maybe a pair of battle-hardened Operators or at least some seasoned mercs.

But no.

What she saw were just two *girls*, casually walking arm-in-arm toward the gun store, one of them ranting about some horrendous-looking shoes in a way that was almost... endearing in its obvious and terrible attempts at making them fit in.

One of them seemingly hadn't even bothered to hide her feelings properly—her face giving away every thought that crossed her mind as she half-considered following up on the other's sarcastic suggestion to actually buy the shoes. The whole scene was downright absurd, with the second girl clearly just making small talk to blend in as they approached.

'What the actual fuck am I even watching right now?' Helica thought, her fingers massaging her temples to stave off the oncoming headache. *'We're having an all-hands-on-deck High Enforcer meeting over **this**? Two girls who can't even mask their approach properly, while there's an actual war brewing outside?!'*

The silence in the room was broken by Jonas, in his typical blunt, cut-off way, proving to Helica immediately that she wasn't the only one with these thoughts.

"Is this joke...?" he grunted, his mechanical voice modulator making him sound even more unimpressed than usual. "Two *girls*, Carinola. They. *Girls*. You fucking us?"

Bunorio jumped in right after, clearly irritated. "Yeah, is this what you've been screaming about for the last half hour, Cari? Two kids wandering into a gun store? Is *that* what caused this entire mess? I know you have a penchant for the theatrical but this is fucking ridiculous. Don't waste your time like this, when we have way more important business to discuss!"

Helica could practically hear the disbelief and anger dripping from his words, and she couldn't help but grin a little as Carinola's face flushed a deeper shade of red.

It was always satisfying to see the harpy get called out for overreacting.

'Honestly, this entire meeting felt like a waste of time from the very start,' she thought, leaning back in her chair, ready to let the others tear Carinola apart.

But then Liliana spoke up, surprising everyone, especially Helica.

"I *must* interject," Liliana began, her voice as smooth and melodic as always, but with a sharpness that Helica hadn't expected. "While it may appear on the surface that these are mere girls—hardly worth our collective attention—I would ask that we look a little deeper before drawing such hasty conclusions."

She adjusted her pristine, already perfectly flowing clothes, her expression utterly unreadable as always. "There is something... *intriguing* about this whole scenario. Something that demands our attention beyond the obvious."

Helica blinked rapidly. *'Liliana's actually defending Carinola...? Am I losing it completely now...?'*

That was unusual.

Beyond unusual, even.

Liliana was somebody that stayed *disgustingly* neutral, playing both sides until she figured out where the advantage was before then slightly nudging her support into that direction; but always making sure she had a way to back out again, should things go against her.

For her, of all people, to suddenly take Carinola's side directly and even go as far as to openly defend her in a High Enforcer meeting, meant there was something more going on here—something *massive* that Helica hadn't caught onto yet.

Liliana continued, her words flowing with a regal grace that made everyone in the room pause. "The latter half of the data package presents some rather... *curious* details, if I do say so myself. Things that, at a glance, might be dismissed, but upon closer inspection, warrant further scrutiny."

Helica's interest was now thoroughly piqued again. She flicked her gaze back to the data package, intrigued now. What had Liliana spotted that she hadn't?

The rest of the room fell quiet, waiting for Liliana to elaborate.

Even Bunorio, who had been all but ready to write off the entire situation as a colossal waste of time, paused. His brow furrowed, and he leaned forward slightly, his sharp eyes narrowing as they tracked Liliana's movements, as if trying to figure out whether she was in on some private joke at his expense.

Liliana meanwhile, ever the performer, took her time pulling the relevant files from her cybernetic link, her fingers dancing in the air as she carefully extracted the information.

With a graceful flick of her wrist, she projected the files into the centre of the room, casting a series of holographic images, witness testimonies, and one grainy video onto the table for all to see.

"The testimonies of the junior enforcers," she began, her voice melodic, "and the only available recording from the singular camera in the alleyway behind the firearm establishment."

The room leaned in, curious. Even Carinola, who had been seething at being questioned just moments earlier, was now focused, eager to let Liliana's findings do the talking for her with a frog-like, smug smile plastered on her face; only to have it freeze a mere instant later as Liliana continued her rundown, showcasing one of the junior enforcer's testimonies.

"While our enforcers had every right to question these two girls based on their suspicious behaviour," she started, casting a brief but sharp glance in Carinola's direction, "the *manner* in which they approached the situation left *much* to be desired. Forcing themselves on two seemingly harmless individuals in a manner this reckless and, frankly, disgusting..." Her words trailed off, but the disapproval was unmistakable.

Liliana waved her hand again, and a different testimony floated into view. "As much as I find the enforcers' actions... worthy of *severe reprimand*, let's move on to what I truly wish to discuss." She cleared her throat, her eyes briefly flitting to the video that hovered in the air.

"Listen to this," she said, her voice now taking on a less refined tone; as she was reading out the first testimony. "'The attack came so fast, I couldn't even see it. I swear; I was looking right at her; didn't even blink!'"

She let that hang in the air for a moment before reading another. "'She was so fast, Damien couldn't even pull the trigger before he realised what was happening. One moment they were standing there, the next, she was holding his arm.'"

Even Bunorio, the eternal sceptic, straightened a bit at that.

The room collectively shifted, now thoroughly intrigued.

"Now, considering that these junior enforcers weren't exactly *complete* nobodies fresh out of training—and one of them had a whitelisted firearm, no less—you'd expect them to have had

the upper hand against... well, *children*," Liliana drawled, dragging out the last word with just the right amount of disdain. "But they didn't. And more than one of them described the same thing—a speed they couldn't even *comprehend*."

She paused, letting the weight of her words settle in the room. "Now, it's one thing to hear these claims from a bunch of junior enforcers trying to save face—likely exaggerating the story to avoid getting ridiculed. But if I were the one reporting this... well, I imagine it'd carry a bit more weight."

A thin smile crossed her lips as she waved her hand over the floating data. "Fortunately for us, we have something a tad bit more impartial at our disposal."

Liliana enlarged the projection containing the alley's security footage, then gestured for the others to pay close attention.

The grainy video feed flickered to life, the timestamp indicating it had captured the moments right before the incident. The angle was far from perfect—positioned far behind the two girls, at the mouth of the alleyway looking inwards, leaving their faces fully obscured and the more minute interactions hard to track.

What was visible, however, were Damien and the rest of the junior enforcers, all perfectly positioned, with one standing a few metres behind the second girl, cutting off any chance of an easy escape. Damien had his gun raised—mere centimetres from the first girl's face.

The girl with the VoniX-black hair.

Helica couldn't help but snort to herself at the sight.

'*VoniX-black hair?*' Ridiculous as a colour choice, but undeniably intriguing.

VoniX-black wasn't just some casual dye job you picked up at a street stall—it was exclusive, absurdly expensive, and far too impractical to wear unless you wanted to make a statement.

It didn't help that her clothes were similarly pristine looking, as if they had just been freshly tailored to fit her very form. The aramid-synthweave was visible to Helica's eyes immediately, pointing towards the fact that the girl definitely came prepared for a potential fight.

Whoever this girl was, she wasn't some random kid off the street.

That much was immediately obvious.

'*So what the fuck are you, then, girl...?*' Helica wondered, her curiosity continuing to grow by the second. Something was definitely off here.

The footage showed Damien and the girls exchanging words, though the camera was too far away to pick up any of it. Still, the tension in their postures, the stiffness in Damien's arm, and the way the girl with the VoniX-black hair leaned slightly forward made it clear that whatever they were discussing wasn't casual.

This wasn't a simple stop-and-frisk.

Then, she stepped forward—bold as you please—deliberately pressing her forehead against the barrel of Damien's gun in a show of pure defiance.

Helica felt the air in the room change as everyone leaned in, their eyes glued to the screen.

There was something in the girl's stance, a sort of unspoken message that said she was about to act.

More words were exchanged, then...

Suddenly, the conference room fell into stunned silence.

Damien's arm was no longer holding the gun. It was in the girl's hand instead—severed at the elbow. The entire move had happened so fast, no one had even registered it until they saw his limb dangling in her grip.

Liliana wasted no time.

She immediately rewound the footage, playing the moment over again.

"Pay close attention," she said, her voice calm but underpinned with her usual regal authority.

She slowed the recording to individual frames, offering a play-by-play of what had just unfolded.

In an instant, the VoniX-black haired girl had grabbed Damien's arm. Simultaneously, a flash of silver appeared—she had drawn a combat knife from beneath her coat. The blade was impossibly sharp, slicing through his arm with a speed that almost defied the recording itself.

Even in slow motion, the movements blurred, the knife cutting with far more efficiency than any normal weapon should have.

It didn't make sense.

Helica's intrigue boiled over. She couldn't sit still anymore.

She tapped into her cerebral link, her mind racing rapidly as she began upscaling the camera's output to get a clearer look. The blur was bothering her, and she was too curious to let it slide. At the same time, half her mind was already syncing into the 38th floor's cyberspace, scouring nearby sensors and security cameras for any additional angles.

She was glad to have splurged on her link just a month before, allowing her to split off her consciousness like this without any adverse effects; as long as the cyberspace didn't end up demanding too much of her resources, of course.

The conference room was deathly quiet as everyone watched the slowed-down footage on loop. For once, no one had anything to say.

Helica muttered under her breath as she worked. ‘*Who are you, girl... and where the fuck did you suddenly come from?*’

As the stunned silence ebbed away, the room erupted into a flurry of voices. Conversations broke out, with members of the group falling into distinct factions. Some, like Bunorio, demanded immediate explanations, their voices edged with disbelief and frustration.

“How the fuck does a kid even move like that?” Bunorio growled, his gravelly voice cutting through the room like a saw. “This is *impossible*. Are we seriously going to believe some random girl just sliced through Damien’s arm like butter?”

Others, like Juroshin, were more analytical, trying to piece together the information as if they were solving a puzzle. “The weapon is likely modified—perhaps some form of vibro-weaponry. While we can’t see the typical distortions on the recording; it could simply be the camera lacking the detail to show it. The speed could be cyber-enhanced reflexes, though... It is far too fast for simple enhancements.”

He let those words ruminate inside the room; not deigning them any further attention.

Meanwhile, a third group simply remained silent, absorbed in their own thoughts.

Helica noticed Orun was among them, as always, his eyes narrowed, fingers steepled beneath his chin, the scar along his jawline twitching slightly. He hadn’t spoken since the footage had played, and that alone was enough to make Helica pay closer attention to his reaction.

Orun was always the last one to really utter his thoughts; preferring to take in everyone else’s first, in order to fully chew through a topic before making a decision. As High Talon, it was his job to be impartial like that, after all. But she was certain that even if he *wasn’t* High Talon, Orun would not have acted any differently—it was in his nature to be methodical and brooding.

Liliana, in contrast to the rest of the room, seemed almost serene, like she had anticipated this outcome all along. She let the flurry of conversations die down before gracefully stepping forward, reclaiming control of the room with an air of unshakable confidence.

“Now,” she began, her voice cutting through the murmurs with ease, “there are, of course, a myriad of potential explanations for what we’ve just seen. But as our dear Carinola mentioned earlier, the information was analysed multiple times. The recording itself hasn’t been altered, nor was the camera faulty in any way. However, one key aspect stands out: The girl in question only exhibited this rapid movement *once*—right at the start of the altercation. After that, she fought like a scrappy amateur, much more in line with her age and appearance, if we assume some prior corporate-level training, and didn’t move *anywhere* near as fast again.”

Liliana let the footage play out past the initial strike, revealing the full brawl between the two girls and the junior enforcers.

The fight, though chaotic, looked far more grounded—brutal, but not extraordinary.

The black-haired girl hadn't displayed the same lightning-fast speed again, and the scuffle quickly turned into a mess of fists, blades, and blood, with the junior enforcers scrambling to keep up.

"This leads me to a few conclusions," Liliana continued, her eyes sweeping over the room. "The girl is using some form of experimental tech that allows her to move at extraordinary speeds, but only in short bursts. It's akin to speedware, but we'd be foolish to jump to such wild conclusions. A girl of her age, equipped with top-tier speedware? That would be beyond unprecedented—straight up unthinkable; especially here inside Delta." She paused, allowing the implications of her words to settle in.

"However, whatever the case, I find this incident thoroughly intriguing." Liliana clasped her hands in front of her. "I propose two motions: First, we vote on whether to reprimand and punish the junior enforcers for their reckless behaviour and, more importantly, for losing a whitelisted firearm. Their handling of the situation was... less than satisfactory. Second, I suggest we investigate these two girls further, especially the black-haired one. She's clearly not some random street kid. I suspect she's connected—either to another gang or possibly to a corporation trying to move in on our territory. Either way, we need more info."

The room fell quiet again, Liliana's words hanging in the air.

Helica was beyond perplexed by this order of events; but the giddiness inside of her, that was ecstatic about the sudden change in the status quo, was pushing her towards making potentially bad decisions.

After all, Liliana rarely spoke so directly, much less pushing for any kind of motion herself—the junior enforcers had *thoroughly* pissed her off with their behaviour, it seemed; the girl with the black hair also managing to garner her regal attention.

A round of conversation broke out in response to Liliana's proposed motions—Carinola being predictably the loudest, but the rest of the High Enforcers had plenty to say as well. Helica, however, was too deep in cyberspace to care about any of it.

Her search was mostly turning up garbage—useless data dumps, encrypted nonsense, and dreck clogging up her feed. It was frustrating, and without fully diving into cyberspace with her full attention, she had to put up with sorting through it manually after-the-fact. She would have to filter out the junk later, but for now, half of her link was committed to the search, while the other half worked on upscaling the available recordings.

At least there was progress on that front. She had managed to clean up the footage enough to pick out more detail on the two girls and how the fight had gone down.

'She wasn't trying to kill them at all... just as I thought,' Helica mused as she watched the black-haired girl purposefully put herself in harm's way, inflicting non-lethal injuries on the junior enforcers instead of going for the easy kill. She definitely could have; the skill was there, evident in her quick, calculated movements. *'The question is, why? What's her game...?'*

Just as she stumbled on something potentially useful in cyberspace, Orun's voice cut through the noise, pulling her back to the meeting.

When the High Talon spoke, even Helica knew better than to ignore him.

"Here's my decision: There will be no votes," he began, dropping a bombshell. The Golden Phoenix was predominantly governed through majority votes, even among the higher-ups, though the High Talon and the gang's leader held the final say.

For Orun to bypass the usual process like this was far from normal. It was rare for either him or the boss to use their absolute authority at all; much less this openly.

"Liliana," he continued, his cold gaze locking onto the smiling woman at his right, "choose two other Talons and investigate these girls. I want names, allegiances, and a full threat assessment by the end of the week—at the latest."

Orun shifted his gaze to Bunoiro and added, "Buno, discipline the Junior Claws involved. Their behaviour was disgraceful and doesn't reflect the standards of the Golden Phoenix. They were lucky to get off with just a few bruises. That black-haired one let them live on purpose, only giving them a bloody nose—or stump."

Bunoiro gave a nod, his face a mix of frustration and understanding. He moved to stand, ready to handle the situation, but Orun stopped him with a raised hand.

"And Buno," Orun said, his tone sharp, "don't go easy. Make it a lesson, not a reminder."

"Understood, High Talon," Bunoiro replied, excusing himself as he left the room with a grim look.

Orun's attention shifted back to the rest of the group. "You all have your orders. Follow them, and make sure the Golden Phoenix's name remains respected. If any of you gather additional intel on these girls, however small, collaborate with Liliana and her task force. I expect a full briefing at the next meeting. *Dismissed.*"

Just like that, the meeting was over, leaving Helica momentarily stunned.

She had barely scratched the surface of her findings, and the meeting was wrapped up already? Before she could fully process the abrupt conclusion, Orun dropped one final bombshell that caught her completely off guard.

"Liliana, if you make direct contact with either of those girls and they don't belong to anyone yet... try to recruit them."

Helica's eyes widened, and she wasn't alone.

The entire room seemed to pause as they all registered Orun's surprising words.

For the High Talon to personally suggest recruiting someone was unheard of, at least in Helica's experience.

As everyone began filing out, Helica quickly moved beside Liliana, whispering, "I'd like to be part of this, Lil."

Liliana gave her a regal smile, one eyebrow raised. "I know you do. But what's it worth to you?"

Helica's mind had been working overtime, processing both the meeting and her cyberspace deep dive. A grin slowly spread across her face as she finished unwrapping a particular recording she'd found towards the end of the two girls' time on the 38th floor.

"Let's just say... *You* can't *afford* not to include me, if you want results by the end of the week," Helica said, a sly, knowing smile playing on her lips. With a flick of her fingers, she injected the first few seconds of the newly found recording straight into Liliana's link...