

Chapter 150 - Long-Awaited Talks III

I just sat there, unable to make sense of the dampness sliding down my cheeks.

‘Valeria is proud of me...?’

The words echoed in my head, but they didn’t land anywhere.

There was no warmth in my chest, no sting in my eyes, no lump in my throat. Just... nothing.

I couldn’t even tell if the tears were emotional or purely biological—if they were even mine... or Sera’s.

‘Has anyone ever even said that to me before?’

The thought drifted up like a ghost, hollow and distant.

I dug through the haze of my old life, but there was nothing.

No memory of a parent saying those words. Not once.

Especially not from someone strict. Someone like Valeria.

‘Would’ve never happened,’ I thought bitterly. *‘Not with the way my mother tried to smother me in affection just to fill the void—and not with **him** around...’*

Thankfully, Valeria didn’t call attention to my tears.

Maybe she didn’t want to make it awkward, or maybe she just didn’t care.

Either way, she kept talking as if nothing had happened.

“I must, furthermore, admit,” she said, her tone flat as usual, but still clearly strained with exhaustion, “that this situation could have been prevented had I upheld my own due diligence. It is not something I take pride in acknowledging, nor in having allowed to occur, but transparency is, at this stage, necessary. For you to properly understand where we now stand—as a family unit—I need to elaborate on how yesterday’s incident came to pass.”

Even through the blur of tears, I could see the shift in her posture.

The faint tightening in her jaw. The ripple that ran through the perfect composure she always carried.

Guilt. Frustration. Anger.

All of it carefully contained, but visible now, like spider-web cracks beneath glass.

After a brief pause, she drew in a controlled breath and continued, her tone once again settling into that corporate cadence that I knew her for. “I am one of the three heads of Counter-Intelligence at EtherLabs. My division specializes in the protection of proprietary

data—research, experimental results, internal designs. We ensure that none of it finds its way into the hands of rival corporations... or anyone else unauthorized to access it.”

My eyebrows lifted a little at that.

‘Not exactly shocking,’ I thought, leaning back slightly. ‘Nyxstalker already hinted she was involved in that line of work. Torture, information extraction—all the fun stuff... And so did Mr. Stirling, now that I think about it. His reaction to my strange, disappearing blood makes a lot more sense now, considering that he would have known that Valeria was the head responsible for keeping experimental tech under wraps.’

Still, hearing her just say it out loud felt... off. Valeria didn’t talk about her work. *Ever.*

‘So why now?’ I wondered. ‘Is this her being honest for once? Or just another move on the board because I happened to save us all yesterday? Does she want something specific from me...?’

“Nyxstalker—real name, Aleky Horin—is one of the foremost intelligence operatives working under ApexWave Synthetics,” Valeria simply moved on. “I assume I do not need to clarify that they stand among EtherLabs’ principal competitors?”

Her eyebrow lifted slightly, and I shook my head right away.

That much was obvious. Even without the little history lesson she was giving, ApexWave’s rivalry with EtherLabs practically screamed itself into the air.

And besides—I remembered that name from the game.

ApexWave Synthetics was a subsidiary of *OmniaPresentia*, one of the four big players in Neo Avalis, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with the other giants of Sobirashu Corporation, QuantitativeDynamics and BlackPixel Works in terms of influence.

Their focus had always been the bleeding edge of the medical-tech industry—synthetics, pharmaceuticals, cybernetics, bionics. The whole package.

Basically, EtherLabs’ direct mirror image.

No wonder things had gotten ugly between them.

“A few years ago,” Valeria went on, her voice dipping into a colder register, “Nyxstalker led a raid on one of our offsite experimental facilities. The intent was to exfiltrate several research documents and one of the prototype subjects under study.”

Her brows furrowed, a renewed, visible crack of irritation in her mask.

“They succeeded. Although Nyxstalker and several members of his unit were captured as a result, the damage was... not insignificant. I’ve been cleaning up the aftermath of that particular failure ever since.”

Then she shook her head, letting out a slow exhale before continuing in a quieter, almost reminiscing tone. “He spent several days with me after his capture. During that time, I ensured that every piece of intelligence buried in his mind was... extracted. Details of ApexWave operations, EtherLabs’ compromised channels, internal personnel lists—everything of value.”

A small, cold smile touched her lips as her gaze met mine again, and despite myself, a chill crept down my spine.

“As he himself reminded us last night, I am exceptionally *capable* at my work. His fixation on me and mine, likely stemmed directly from that fact. Frankly, I am surprised he recovered enough of himself to come after us again, considering the extent of what he disclosed under my tender care in those weeks...”

Then, just as I opened my mouth to ask the question that immediately came to mind—how he could have *possibly* escaped that situation—she lifted her good hand to stop me.

“Before you ask,” she said, tone smoothing back into calm authority, “operatives of that tier—myself included—are protected under a large net of corporate security pacts. The elimination of any one of us without sanctioned cause would set off retaliatory measures that *no* organization wishes to seriously entertain. The political and financial consequences are far too severe. This is, regrettably, the very reason that Gabriel and you were targeted by him, instead...”

Her eyes hardened, the exhaustion giving way to something sharper. “But yes, he was, unfortunately, ultimately released from my care. Not by choice, I *assure* you. If it were up to me, Aleky Horin would have been disappeared many years ago, damn the consequences...”

She paused, her lips tightening as her gaze drifted off, unfocused—like she was scrolling through archived surveillance logs only she could see. “Several months following his release, EtherLabs began registering a pattern of persistent breaches. Not full-scale infiltrations—these were surgical. Selective data retrievals, reconnaissance incursions, and targeted personnel probes. Initially, my department assessed them as standard ApexWave recovery efforts—attempts to reclaim what they had lost during the prior operation. But the signature was *too* consistent. The precision, *too* deliberate.”

Her eyes refocused, sharp again, voice steadying into that polished corporate rhythm. “In time, the pattern became clear to me. The objective was not EtherLabs as a whole—it was *me*. Nyxstalker had somehow reallocated his personal vendetta into a formal ApexWave directive—to this day, I still don’t know how. But his focus was obvious and singular: Dismantling my work, undermining my networks, and drawing me into the open.

“I presented a comprehensive report to the Executive Council once I had verified the data to support my hypothesis. After internal review, the decision was made to enact a Class-Three Protection Protocol for me and my household. A controlled relocation sequence began, coupled with a full-scale obfuscation of our digital and logistical footprints.”

Her tone softened just slightly, though her diction remained razor precise. “We became a moving target by design. Untraceable. Our identifiers, scrubbed and replaced with layered

falsifications across every registry that mattered. The thought was simple: ApexWave's operatives couldn't hit what they couldn't locate, and we could bleed them dry of resources."

A faint, almost rueful smile curved her lips. "Ironically, EtherLabs profited more from his fixation than he ever did. Just as planned, ApexWave diverted an extraordinary amount of capital and manpower into tracking me down—resources that our own field teams exploited to conduct high-value counter-raids. Entire data vaults were compromised under the cover of his obsession. Each operation netted EtherLabs millions in recovered assets."

She let out a quiet breath, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. "And through it all, Aleky never realized how thoroughly he was being used."

Her mouth twitched, and I realized that the expression wasn't amusement, but pain.

"He knew he would *never* catch me," she murmured, echoing Nyxstalker's words from the night before. "He said as much yesterday. And he was right. He never did catch me. And yet, he kept coming. Again and again."

Her eyes lingered on me then—expectant, patient, but heavy with something that made the air feel like lead.

It was clear what she was waiting for.

I hesitated, staring down at the table, trying to decide if I truly wanted to know the answer that she was clearly semi-reluctant to give.

But how could I not, when she was laying everything else bare like this?

After everything that had already happened, what point was there in staying in the dark?

So I asked. "How did it happen, then? How did he finally catch up?"

Valeria didn't answer right away.

Instead, she gave a quiet, self-deprecating laugh—soft, humorless, tired.

Then she met my eyes, her expression caught somewhere between guilt and resignation.

"Because I tried to be a good mother."

I just stared at her, utterly thrown off.

'Valeria? A good mother...?'

What the hell was that even supposed to mean?

Thankfully, she didn't make me sit in confusion for long.

After taking in my dumbfounded expression—apparently satisfied by how floored I looked—she gave a quiet, mirthless laugh and leaned back slightly in her chair.

Her posture, always unnervingly straight and composed, slipped for the first time since I'd known her as she leaned back against the chair, letting her ram-rod straight back relax.

"It was my fault," she said simply, the corporate precision still there, but thinner now—fraying at the edges. "Because I deviated from protocol."

Her gaze unfocused for a moment, as though she were reviewing her own performance file. "Oliver was right. He insisted—repeatedly—that we relocate to the next safe unit. It was the correct move. Every indicator pointed to the risk increasing the longer we stayed."

She let out another dry laugh, shaking her head. "And yet, I denied him. I convinced myself I knew better. That my judgment, my control, would be enough. That I had all the variables, all the calculations, done properly."

Her tone softened—not into warmth exactly, but something dangerously close to regret. "But... You were the variable I did not account for properly, Seraphine. I wanted to give you stability. Familiar surroundings. At least, as familiar as possible, given our recent living situations... A sense of safety after the trauma you endured. Cases like yours—injury-induced amnesia—respond better to familiarity, to environmental triggers. I thought... perhaps if I kept you in this place long enough, something would resurface. You would remember who you were before... everything."

The corporate sharpness in her tone finally collapsed entirely, leaving only the weary cadence of someone who'd run out of excuses. "I was blind and stupid. Blinded by... concern, I suppose. I wanted to help you, so desperately... I wanted to fix what couldn't be fixed."

She sighed, the air trembling faintly between us. "Oliver warned me. More than once. He said I was prioritizing comfort over caution. That I was gambling with all our lives for something that may never return. And he was right. He always is, *somehow*... If I'd listened—if I'd done what logic demanded—Oliver wouldn't be in surgery right now. Gabriel wouldn't..."

She trailed off, pressing her lips together tightly before finishing in a near-whisper, "...he wouldn't have lost what he did."

Silence reigned after Valeria finished.

I didn't know what to say. I just stared at her, words refusing to form.

The realization sank in slowly, painfully: She had done all this—for me. For *her daughter*.

For someone who wasn't even me, technically.

And that decision had nearly killed Oliver. Left Gabriel severely maimed, not to mention the mental trauma it had no doubt caused for the poor boy. Killed Mr. Stirling.

Put all of us through hell.

It was a lot to take in. Too much, honestly.

And for the first time since I'd met her, I didn't know whether to be angry at her... or feel sorry for her.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Not even a sound. My throat felt tight, useless.

I had no idea what to say—no idea what could possibly make sense in a moment like that.

The small movement, though, was apparently enough to draw Valeria's attention back to me.

Her eyes lifted, locking with mine, and for once, there was nothing polished or impenetrable in them. Just exhaustion—raw, bone-deep weariness. The kind that stripped away every layer of presentation and left nothing but the truth behind.

"But it was all for nothing, wasn't it?" she said quietly. Her voice didn't tremble, but there was a weight to it that hit harder than any outburst could've. "You're gone, aren't you, little Sera? You died in that alley... for reasons I will likely never be able to uncover."

She exhaled, the faintest quiver threading through it. "I should have accepted it. Should have accepted *you*. The new you—the one sitting in front of me now—the one who is trying so *hard* to fit in. To make me proud. To *belong*. And all I could think about was getting the version of my daughter back that I knew. My rebellious, impossible, infuriating girl..."

Her gaze dropped to the table for a moment before drifting back to me, eyes glassy in the dim light.

"I just wanted *one* more chance," she whispered. "To prove that I could do better this time. To help her find her path instead of... pushing her away and making everything worse, like I always did."

When she looked back up at me, there was no steel in her expression anymore—just raw, almost pleading confusion. Her next words came out so small I almost missed them, if the apartment hadn't been so empty and quiet.

"Tell me, Seraphine... is that so wrong? Does that make me a bad person? A bad mother...?"

I stared at her, completely frozen.

Valeria Vildea—the ice-cold executive who could turn a boardroom to ash with a look—was sitting in front of me, stripped bare.

Her words hung between us, fragile and human in a way I hadn't even thought *possible*.

And I realized what it was she wanted from me.

She wasn't just talking to *me*. She was talking to *her*.

The original Sera. To the daughter she'd lost.

She wanted absolution. Forgiveness. From the ghost wearing her child's face.

The thought made my stomach twist.

'How could I possibly give her that?'

What right did I even have? I wasn't her daughter. I wasn't even sure what I was anymore.

Just a Soul that had stolen another life—a stranger playing dress-up in someone else's skin.

Yeah, I'd done things for this family.

I had saved Gabriel.

I'd fought to keep everyone alive.

I'd even managed to just barely eek out for things not to end in complete disaster yesterday.

But that didn't change the fact that Sera was gone. Dead. And with her, the part that intrinsically belonged to this family.

'She misses her daughter,' I thought numbly, my throat tightening. *'And I'm just... the replacement. A knockoff she never asked for. A fake that's been trying to give her what the fake thought she wanted, just rubbing in how different I truly was from the original.'*

If I told her it was okay—if I gave her that forgiveness—would I be doing right by the real Sera? Or would I just be digging myself deeper into this lie, feeding the parasite that I'd already become?

Because that's what I was, wasn't I?

A parasite living someone else's life. Wearing someone else's face.

For me, Valeria had always been nothing but a final boss.

An obstacle to navigate, not a person to understand.

Someone I needed to impress, manipulate, survive around—not connect with.

'So... Was it really her fault for not accepting me, then?' I asked myself, but the answer was obvious. *'No... probably not. I never even gave her a reason to, did I?'*

I'd treated her like an opponent in a video game, nothing more. Cold and transactional, with a sprinkle of strategy.

I'd never even tried to learn what kind of bond Sera had with her, what their arguments had been about, or what the original Sera had thought of her mother, barring the absolute most basic question of asking Gabriel about it all, one single time.

And that realization hit like a punch to the gut.

If Valeria was a bad person for wanting her little girl back, then I was just as bad—for pretending to be that girl without caring enough to understand what I'd taken.

I realized then, that Gabriel had been right once again: Her and I were extremely similar.

We were both selfish, in our own ways.

Her for wanting for the daughter who was gone.

And me—for pretending to fill that void like I had any right to.

I took a long, shaky breath, the sound filling the quiet space between us. It was enough to make Valeria look up at me again, her tired eyes sharpening ever so slightly as our gazes met once more.

“I don’t think that makes you a bad person,” I started slowly, forcing the words past the tightness in my throat. “Or even a bad mother. But...” I hesitated, feeling the weight of what I was about to say. “What *does* make you a bad person is telling me all of this.”

I half-expected her to snap at me, to intimidate me the way she always did—to remind me that I was speaking out of line.

But she didn’t.

She just watched me, silent and still, her expression unreadable—not because of her usual mask, but because there was *too much* to interpret all at once.

So I pressed on.

“I can’t give you the absolution you’re looking for, mo—Valeria,” I corrected myself mid-word, the old habit slipping out before I could stop it. “I’m not her. You said it yourself. I don’t know who I—she was or what she was like before all this. I only know fragments—bits and pieces from Gabriel, from Oliver—but I don’t know what she meant to you. What our—your relationship was like. I don’t know what you lost.”

My voice cracked as the words caught up to me. “It’s not my place to forgive you for that. It’s not mine to say. I’m not her. I’m just... *me*.”

I swallowed hard, blinking through the blur forming in my eyes. “I’ve been trying to fit in because I don’t know what else to do. I didn’t ask for any of this. I didn’t want to wake up in this life, surrounded by people who knew a version of me I’ll never be able to live up to.”

Tears started to spill, hot against my cheeks, but I kept going. “I’ve been doing the damn best I can, *every single day*. Trying to do right by everyone. Trying to *be* something that makes sense in all this chaos. But you telling me you miss her—telling me you want *her* back—*that’s* what makes you a bad mother, Valeria.”

The words came out rougher than I intended, but I didn’t stop. “Because you’re putting me in a position I can’t win. *I am still your daughter*. But I can’t *be* her. No matter what I do, no matter how much I try, I’ll *never* be her... And you can’t get her back”

I drew in one more trembling breath, the final words barely above a whisper. “You’re ignoring the daughter in front of you, that needs you too...”