

Chapter 211 - Occupation

The silence after Rina's last words stretched, and I found I couldn't fill it.

I tried—opened my mouth twice, felt some words assemble and then crumble somewhere between my chest and my throat, and closed it again both times.

My Edge was working overtime in the background, my Ego doing its steady best to keep the emotional flood from breaching the walls, and even with both of them running, my eyes *still* stung and my throat still had a lump in it the size of a fist.

Because—*three years*. Three years of quietly watching over a runaway girl in an alley, cleaning her up, giving her a safe harbor, protecting her... Asking for *nothing* in return.

All of it from a woman who had been sold at five, harvested at seven, caged and abused at ten... Who had every conceivable reason to decide the world owed *her* and not the other way around.

I reached for my glass of water and took a long, deliberate gulp—buying time, hiding behind the rim, letting the cold slide down and loosen the knot enough to speak.

"You're incredible," I finally managed to squeeze out. "That's—Rina, you're *genuinely* incredible. There's no other way to put it."

"I know," she said immediately, chin lifting, a smug grin snapping into place like it had always simply *belonged* to be there. "I'm the best. Glad the new management figured it out this quickly—took *her* like eight months to admit it out loud."

A surprised laugh escaped me—and just like that, some of the crushing weight lifted off the booth, levity flowing back in through the crack she'd deliberately opened.

But behind my smile, the thought kept turning itself over.

Because she genuinely *was* incredible. There wasn't a better word for it.

To go through *all of that*—to have the worst things imaginable *forced* onto you, literally physically *carved* into your body piece by piece—and then to take that exact thing, claim it, rebuild your entire life around it on your own terms, and come out the other side *proud* of it?

That was something several tiers above simple resilience that I didn't even have a word for.

'I couldn't have done that,' I thought, honestly. *'I genuinely don't think I could.'*

Hell—in a strange, sideways way, it was *exactly* what I was struggling to do right now.

My trauma wasn't the same as hers, not even close in shape or scale. But it *was* there in a similar way, bound tight around [Murder], flaring up every single time my thoughts drifted too close to my actions, to the itemized kill-lists the System so helpfully maintained, to the flat *nothing* I felt when I read it.

Takeda-san's whole Bushido framework had taken the edge off so far—given the nothing a frame to sit in. But I hadn't *field-tested* any of it yet.

I had no idea whether the ideology would *actually* hold my sanity together the next time things got wet, or whether it would crumble and turn to dust the moment real pressure hit it, like all the other attempts at self-reflection had in my past.

Yet Rina had *already* walked that entire road. Every reconciliation step I was fumbling through in the dark, she'd *completed* years ago—and come out the other side stronger than I'd previously believed a person *could* come out of something like that.

I wanted to ask her about it. How she'd done it.

What the road had *actually* looked like from inside, when it led to success...

But that felt like a door I hadn't earned the right to knock on yet—not thirty minutes into a friendship we were rebuilding from *ashes*.

So instead, I picked up the thread she'd left dangling, for now.

"You... mentioned something about protection," I said. "Earlier. That you made sure I had it whenever I was out in the city, whether I knew or not. What's that about?"

The change in Rina was immediate.

The levity drained out of her face, and a tired sigh escaped her—long and heavy, carrying the same grief from earlier in it, and something harder underneath as well that I couldn't quite identify.

Her eyes met mine, held them for a moment with that sad, worn look, before she answered.

"I hired Operators back then. A group of three." She turned her glass slowly on the table. "Their contract was simple: Shadow you—*her*—whenever she left Delta. Keep her out of trouble. Stay unseen unless *absolutely* necessary... She never knew they existed, I don't think. That was the whole point. She'd have been *mortified* if she'd known, would've told me to stop wasting my Credits, and then she'd have snuck out *without* telling me just to make it *fair*."

A faint, involuntary ghost of a smile. "So I just... didn't tell her."

My eyes went wide.

This was the first I'd heard of this, anywhere. Which—okay, given that Rina had *just* explained the entire arrangement was secret by design, that wasn't exactly shocking.

But still. *Nobody* had known.

Not Gabriel or Oliver, not Valeria with all her reach, not a *single thread* of it had surfaced in any conversation about that night, ever.

And that meant—

A spark of hope flared up in my chest. *'Witnesses! There were **witnesses** that night. Three trained Operators, contracted to watch her, presumably physically present when whatever happened, happened—'*

The logical part of my brain, however, doused it almost as fast as it kindled.

'No... Think! If the Operators had seen anything and reported it, Rina wouldn't be sitting here with zero idea what happened to me. She's been just as in the dark as everyone else this entire conversation. Which means either they saw nothing... or they never reported back at all...'

There was a *but* coming. I could see it assembling on Rina's face at the same time as I had come to the inevitable conclusion on my own.

"Two of them were found dead," she said, fingers still tracing the rim of her glass, her voice going flat in a way I hadn't heard from her yet. "A few days after she disappeared. The third—" a small, cold shrug, "—nobody knows. Gone, I guess. No body, no trail, nothing."

"Did you try to search for them?"

"Not hard," she admitted, and there was no apology in it. "Because honestly? I was too busy tearing the district apart looking for anyone that had seen anything immediate than to spend resources hunting them down. Especially because they effectively flaked out, that damn blank... And it's not like there was some deep relationship there worth mourning either. They were contractors. I paid them good Credits—*really* good, mind you—for exactly *one* job."

Her jaw tightened, and the temperature of her voice dropped several degrees further. "*Keep her safe. One job.* And she vanished on their watch, and two of them turned up dead, and the third ran or died or *whatever*, without ever even reporting back to me—so as far as I'm concerned, they failed the *only thing* they ever existed to do, and I don't lose sleep over what happened to them."

The coldness of her voice and words was genuinely startling—this was the same woman who'd been positively *radiating* warmth just sixty seconds ago—but I couldn't honestly say it was uncalled for.

After all, if you paid someone a seeming *fortune* for protection, and the person you loved most died on their watch anyway... it would be hard for *anyone* not to have some resentment built there—Rina wasn't exactly forced to be an all-forgiving saint, just because she was nice.

"The only real thread I *did* pull, trying to get some worth out of my investments," she continued, exhaling some of the frost back out, "was through the OPN. Figured if *anyone* could reach the third one, it'd be them—contractors don't just *ghost* the Network, it's their whole livelihood, after all."

She shook her head. "But nothing. The OPN couldn't establish contact either. Whoever they were, they're either off-grid in a way that takes serious effort to uncover... or they're dead too, just somewhere nobody's bothered to look yet."

She shrugged again, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"So... No idea what happened to them. Any of them." Her gaze came back up to mine. "And before you ask—yeah. I know exactly what you're thinking, because I thought it too, for months: They're the only people who might've seen what happened that night. But every single path to them is basically a dead end."

She leaned back against the soft cushion of the bench, one arm draped along the top of the booth, and added almost absent-mindedly to her own rant.

"Only way to really dig deeper on that would be to be part of the OPN, I'd imagine... Some chromed-up knucklehead Operator wasting everyone's time and pocketing their Credits, working their way up the ladder, until they can earn some major favors, then seeing what they can shake loose from the inside..."

She flicked a dismissive hand. "*Probably*. But I've wasted enough Creds on those types already. Ain't no way I'm getting suckered into *that* again."

I tried to keep my face *perfectly* composed as it should be in this situation.

Just a friend listening to another friend's mildly bitter tangent about wasted Credits.

I failed.

Because Rina read faces *for a living*—read the micro-twitches beneath masks that clients didn't even know they were wearing—and she caught the flicker on mine in under a second.

Her eyes snapped to me and *fixed*.

"What?" she demanded, sitting forward. "What's wrong? Did I say something bad? I mean—I'm not the *biggest* fan of Operators, obviously, but I didn't say anything *bad*, right?"

"No! No, it wasn't bad," I confirmed immediately.

"Then what was that *look* for?"

And I had absolutely no idea how to get out of this one.

Deflection was *technically* available.

A shrug, a "*just tired*," a subject change... She might even let it slide.

But lying to her? At the very foundation of this new relationship we were tentatively trying to build—minutes after she'd handed me her *entire life story* basically unprompted, minutes after she'd chosen to *keep me* despite everything?

That wasn't in the cards. Not really.

Not if I ever wanted this to be anything real.

So I involuntarily shrunk down on myself a little—which felt genuinely *ridiculous*, given that I was several years her elder by any honest accounting, even if I absolutely did not feel like it right now—and found I couldn't quite meet her eyes as I quietly said:

"I might... have a way in. With the OPN."

Rina stared at me.

"*You?! How?!*" Then the concern crashed in over the surprise, her brows knitting hard. "Wait—what did you need the OPN for? Is everything alright? Are you in some kind of trouble, Sera?"

"N—No! Everything's fine," I said immediately, hands coming up. "Really! Nothing like that. It's—"

I took a deep breath.

"I'm an Operator. With the OPN. That's why I have a way in—I'm *already* in."

I'd half-wanted to route it differently—I *have a contact, an Operator named Ela*—keep the wall between personas for [Double Life] standing the way I did with everyone else...

But I already knew that road just led to more questions I couldn't answer.

How did I meet this Ela? Why did a fifteen-year-old need an *Operator* contact? What business had we done and when? Every thread would inevitably unspool somewhere that I couldn't find easy answers to, and my [Deception] wasn't up-to-par with somebody like Rina, who was *already* looking for things that were wrong with me.

The best way forward with Rina—strangely, despite her being the person in this world I knew for the *least* amount of time—was, for once, *honesty*. More honesty than I'd afforded practically anyone else here so far.

But if three years of quietly bankrolling Old Sera's invisible protection detail was anything to go by, I wasn't putting myself at *much* real risk by admitting it.

Rina, meanwhile, simply stared at me, slack-jawed.

"*You*," she said slowly. "An Operator."

A long pause. "*Little Sera* is an Operator..."

I nodded and then, since words clearly weren't closing the deal, I reached back under my shirt, drew the RaZ, and set it flat on the table between us.

Proof of the point—I was armed, right now, in this booth.

Her eyes went to the knife. Then to me. Then back to the knife. Then back to me.

"...Is *that* why you're swole now?" she finally asked. "To *fight* people?"

Heat crept up my face and into my ears, and the denial was already halfway loaded—'No! *It's obviously not like that!*'—

Except... *Technically*... That was *exactly* why I'd put so much emphasis on Body training, wasn't it? Survival first, of course—but survival in this world had never once, in my head, been *separable* from fighting people.

That was the entire equation: Get strong so that when someone tried to kill me, they failed.

And I realized, sitting there with my ears burning, that I was genuinely *scared* of Rina's judgment right now.

Which was *decidedly* strange.

I'd known her for all of half an hour. And yet the knot sitting in my stomach was the same deep-seated kind I usually only got around Valeria—no, worse than that, honestly.

The Valeria-knot was made of safety concerns and uncertainty, of never knowing quite where I stood with her.

This one was different... This was more akin to the Mr. Shori knot. The one from the kitchen, after the Anima incident, standing there while a silent shake of his head hit harder than any shouting ever could have.

I didn't want to *disappoint* her. Like she was a big sister, or something—or so I'd imagine it felt, seeing as I had always been an only child.

"...Yeah," I admitted, barely above a mutter. "Pretty much exactly that..."

For a few long moments, Rina just kept staring at me.

Then her lips twitched and her shoulders started shaking.

And then she completely, thoroughly *lost it*—collapsing forward over the table into a full-on belly-laugh, one hand slapping the surface hard enough to rattle the glasses, the other pressed against her ribs as the laughter poured out of her in great, heaving waves.

"You—" she wheezed, trying and failing to compose herself. "You just—you *sat* there—you let me run my whole mouth about—about chromed-up knucklehead Operators wasting everyone's time and—and the *entire time*—"

Another wave took her under.

"Dragons-damned—my little Sera vanishes for months, comes back from the *dead*, and shows up as an *Operator*! Of all the—of literally *all* the things—!"

I sat by awkwardly, entirely unable to suppress the stupid grin spreading across my own face.

Watching Rina absolutely dissolve in front of me—after everything this conversation had already been, after the grief, the tears and the weight of it all—felt like watching a pressure valve finally blow.

It was absolutely contagious.

It was also, admittedly, at my expense, but I found I didn't mind that even a little.

"Glad my career choices are entertaining," I offered dryly.

"They're *nova*, is what they are," she gasped, wiping at her eyes—the synth-skin absorbing the moisture instantly again. "Oh, she'd have *hated* this. She'd have *absolutely* hated this. You know that? Miss '*violence-is-scary-let's-go-home*.' An *Operator*."

She shook her head, the last laughs still bubbling out of her. "The universe has a *sick* sense of humor, Sera, let me tell you."

I had no idea what to reply to that, so I busied myself with putting the RaZ away instead, sliding it back into its hidden position at the small of my back. When I looked up, Rina's eyes had gone yellow for a brief moment—and a data transfer request pinged into my interface.

I raised an eyebrow.

"The deets on the Operator," she explained, the levity draining back down into something more focused. "The third one. If you've got an in with the OPN, maybe you can dig up more than I ever could from the outside."

I accepted the transfer—and received what could only *very* generously be called an information package.

[Operator: "Sinnes" — OPN Registration #NA-77213-K]

That was it.

Just a handle and an Operator Number, nothing else.

A moment later, two more packets arrived—similarly sparse, both marked with a small, cold [DECEASED] flag.

[Operator: "On'Dar" — OPN Registration #NA-69054-K — DECEASED]

[Operator: "Mirena" — OPN Registration #NA-01138-L — DECEASED]

'Not much to work with at all,' I thought, filing all three away with care regardless. *'But it's three more threads than I had an hour ago...'*

"Maybe you can ask around about the group with your contacts or whatever," Rina said with a shrug. "I've got no idea how any of that actually works on the inside. Rankings, favors, whatever it is you crazy types do."

Then the last of the humor fell away from her face entirely, and she leaned forward, elbows on the table, suddenly and completely serious.

"Just—promise me you'll stay safe. Alright?" Her voice had gone quiet. "I... I can't lose you again. I'd *love* to tell you not to put yourself in danger like this at all. Believe me, the speech is *right here*, fully loaded."

She let out a faint, helpless huff.

"But I also know *exactly* how little good it would do. You're different from the Old You, yeah—but I can *tell* the stubborn streak survived whatever strangeness the incident caused. It's sitting right there behind your eyes. If I told you *not* to do it, you'd just go and do it twice as hard out of spite."

She... wasn't wrong in the least.

"So just... stay safe. Okay? That's all."

"I promise," I said immediately, putting on the most serious expression I could muster—and meaning it, as far as it went.

I had no intention of putting myself unduly at risk.

Well... no *more* risk than was necessary for what I wanted to achieve, at least.

Which, admittedly, was doing some *heavy* lifting as far as qualifiers went, considering I couldn't exactly claim the mantle of *safety-conscious* while actively maintaining a registration as a damn Operator.

But the spirit of the promise was genuine, and that would have to be enough for both of us.

Rina held my eyes for a moment longer, searching, then nodded—apparently satisfied with whatever she found inside them.

The conversation lapsed into a comfortable lull after that.

A minute or so of quiet, both of us nursing our drinks, the ambient, muffled noise of the Valedictorian filling the space—the Operator crew's laughter, the distant clink of the bar, someone feeding the jukebox... And I figured that was as good a time as any to broach the *other* topic I'd been wanting to pick Rina's brain about.

"Say..." I started, keeping my tone as casual as I could manage. "At your work—do you... do you sometimes use Personality Shards?"

Rina's eyebrows shot straight into her hairline.

She went quiet—*very* quiet.

For several long moments she just *looked* at me, and I watched something careful and guarded slide into place behind her neon-blue eyes.

"Where, exactly," she said slowly, "did you hear about those?"

I said nothing.

"Because I made *damn* sure *she* never even learned those things existed." Her eyes narrowed. "I was *very* thorough about it. And now the returned edition just waltzes in and asks about them over drinks? So... Where?"

"I've learned a lot in the past few months," I immediately deflected, with a vague gesture, having no real explanation for that one at-hand. "The OPN exposes you to all kinds of things. Comes with the territory, really."

Rina visibly recognized the deflection—I watched her catch it in the flicker of her eyes, weigh it, and even consider pressing the issue... The professional versus my Level 4 [Deception].

For a second I genuinely wasn't sure which way it would go.

Then she sighed once again—heavily—and sank back into her seat, letting it slide.

"Yeah," she said finally. "I do. Use them. The highest-paying customers pretty much always insist on 'em."

Her mouth twisted slightly. "Not a big fan myself, for obvious reasons... Never have been. But the job's the job—what can you do."

She took a sip of her drink—which we'd refilled during the previous lull—then fixed me over the rim of the glass, her right eyebrow arching in open question.

"Why do you ask?"

I took a deep breath.

Because this was it—the actual reason, or at least half of it, that I'd needed this meeting.

And it was already far too late to back out now.

"Well... I was wondering if I could get some advice," I said. "About personalities. As in—"

I stopped, tried again, struggling to find a phrasing that didn't sound utterly fucking *insane*.

"How they... work, I guess. Like, how you can tell where one ends and—"

I exhaled, abandoned the careful approach entirely, and just said it.

"During the coma. After the incident. I wasn't just... *blacked out*, Rina. There was something else." My fingers tightened slightly around my glass. "I had *dreams*, Rina. *Very, very* long dreams. And... I don't really know where the dreams end and I start anymore..."