

Chapter 146 - Conclusion

Several moments passed while I stared at the blinking error window, my stomach sinking lower with every second.

The meaning was too obvious to ignore.

'He died, didn't he...?'

The alternative—that he'd just canceled my debt in the middle of a fight—was so unlikely it bordered on laughable.

Mr. Stirling wasn't exactly the type to throw away leverage, especially not mid-combat.

What unsettled me even more, though, was the silence. Nyxstalker hadn't come back.

It had been nearly a full minute since the gunfire and explosions outside had died out, and still... nothing.

A soft whimper pulled me back.

My eyes dropped to Gabriel.

His gaze was unfocused, glassy, his pupils blown wide like he wasn't really here but couldn't fully slip under either. The drugs—probably the same cocktail burning through my veins—had him caught in that cruel limbo.

"I wish I could help you, Gabe," I whispered, stroking his hair with trembling fingers, hoping the small touch might anchor him. *'Just a bit longer. Hold on for me, please...'*

My own body was a furnace.

My neck still burned raw from [Venombite], but the same drugs keeping us conscious forced me to endure it. It wasn't as bad as that first cybernetic burnout I'd suffered during the Cyberspace foray with Kill Joy, but the pounding headache was relentless, the droning inside my skull loud enough to drown out everything but my own ragged breathing.

Every now and then, one of Gabriel's whimpers cut through, thin and fragile.

I'd only marginally overheated my link this time with the use of [Venombite], not a full meltdown like last time around. That thought dragged my gaze across the room, toward where the netrunner still lay slumped.

I'd nearly forgotten about him.

He was still there, twitching, drool spilling from his slack mouth and darkening our carpet. Barely holding himself together.

The sight gave me pause.

I hadn't expected [Venombite] to hit a corpo-level netrunner *this* hard.

But then again, stripped of ICE, it didn't matter who you were—corpo, ganger, scav.

Even Kill Joy himself would buckle under a raw offensive quick-hack if he went in completely unshielded, which this netrunner had basically done: Only 6% of the [Venombite]'s code had been caught by the last remnants of the netrunner's ICE after he had taken the full-force punch through of the PremMed signal.

Still, the twitching mess in the middle of the room wasn't finished.

The netrunner wasn't quite dealt with—not yet.

I forced myself upright, every muscle screaming, figuring I might as well take whatever slim window we had.

Nyxstalker still hadn't come back—whatever kept him out there was clearly doing its job.

The netrunner was still twitching on the carpet like a broken puppet.

I moved over, dropped down onto him, and drove my knees into his shoulders to pin him.

Then I started swinging.

My fist cracked into his face, snapping his nose flat and shattering bone in his cheek.

“—ughter...” a faint, muffled sound drifted from somewhere, too faint to catch.

I didn't stop.

I pulled back and drove my other fist into the other side of his face, breaking more bone, folding in what little structure was left. Blood gushed down in thick streams, choking him as it filled his throat.

He sputtered, weakly thrashing under me, but there wasn't any strength behind it.

I raised my fist again, ready to keep going until he stopped moving—

“*Seraphine!*”

The name cut through me like a blade, snapping me out of the haze.

Valeria had only called me that in one instance before—right before the NeuroCorpse dinner, when she'd scolded me for my mistakes and then, almost as an afterthought, wished me a happy belated birthday.

Hearing it now, not “daughter” but *Seraphine*, somehow, cut straight through the noise in my skull.

I turned toward her voice.

Valeria was standing—barely. She was lopsided, her entire right side dead weight, blood running down from wounds that should've kept her on the ground.

But she was upright, a few meters away, and her eyes were locked on me.

"Leave him," she said. Her voice was still cool, but frayed around the edges with exhaustion. "He represents no actionable threat anymore. However, his retained informational data will prove strategically invaluable in our future actions against Nyxstalker. I will personally oversee the extraction process and guarantee that his information is leveraged to immediate operational effect."

I glanced back at the netrunner's ruined face, blood bubbling at his lips with every shallow cough. My thoughts crawled through molasses, struggling to keep up through the fog of pain and drug haze.

I exhaled sharply and pushed off him, rising unsteadily to my feet.

He stayed where he was, choking on his own blood, cradling his face weakly.

"Assist me, Seraphine," Valeria said. And her tone—stripped of its usual edge—was different. Undeniably exhausted and strangely... *honest*.

I met her eyes and realised that, for the first time, she wasn't speaking down to me.

She was asking. Genuinely *asking* for my help.

"What do you need?" I heard myself ask, my own voice sounding hollow in my ears.

Since patching Gabriel up, whatever focus I'd had left was gone.

I was just running on fumes.

"I need a change of clothes—in my room. On the bed. Take any dress, it does not matter," she said, steady but faint.

'*A dress? Clothes?*' My mind stumbled. '*What the fuck is she on about?*'

"And after," she went on, gesturing toward what was left of the kitchen counter, rubble of marble and granite scattered like broken teeth around the ruined plinth, "you will help me reach the counter. Then stand by my right side, covering it as best you can. It is imperative that we move quickly, Seraphine."

Her eyes locked onto mine, sharp despite everything, cutting straight through the fog in my head.

Whatever she was planning, however insane it sounded, to her it was life or death.

And I let it happen.

The strange haze clouding my thoughts made it almost comforting to just... obey. Not having to think, not having to plan or weigh options, but simply act on instruction—it was easier.

Like sliding into warm water after drowning in ice cold water for the past minutes.

So I moved.

Valeria's and Oliver's room felt utterly alien as I entered it, but I honestly barely even saw it.

My eyes scanned for the bed and found it instantly, the rest of the room blurring into nothing.

Dresses were spread across the covers like a showroom display, and I just grabbed the first that caught my hand—a midnight-black one—and turned back without pausing.

Back in the ruined apartment, I knelt to help Valeria.

Her old dress was nothing but shredded silk and blood, clinging to her like scraps of paper.

I peeled it all away, then slid the new fabric over her.

The change was instant and almost unreal in its entirety.

A minute ago she'd looked half-dead—wounded, exhausted, slumped into herself. But in the clean lines of the black dress, she was transformed again, a figure of poise and authority.

She still leaned heavily, her right side slack and useless, but *somehow* she managed to wear it like a statement rather than a weakness.

I hooked my arm under her right side and helped her toward the counter, just as she had requested. Anxiety coiled tighter in my chest with every step closer to the kitchen breach, the jagged wound in the apartment wall yawning wide and silent.

Any second now, I expected Nyxstalker to stride through it, finishing what he'd started.

But somehow, he didn't.

We made it to the counter without any further sounds, explosions or people randomly appearing inside the ruined apartment or the floor beyond.

Valeria gave me a quick nod of approval as I shifted into position, covering her right side with my body. She leaned against the broken plinth, but not like someone about to collapse.

She made it look casual, almost deliberate—though I knew damn well she needed it just to stay standing, judging by the sheer weight she had put on me on our way here.

Valeria adjusted her stance against the counter, her voice calm but carrying that clipped precision she never dropped, no matter how battered she looked. "I will handle all of the communication. You need only stand precisely where you are, Seraphine. Do not move until I signal otherwise, and everything will resolve appropriately from here onward."

Then, softer—almost unrecognizable—she added, "I will take care of everything."

A moment later, I felt it—a faint pressure against my cerebral link.

My body flinched on instinct, expecting another wave of pain, but instead the opposite happened.

The radiant fire and searing heat in my neck ebbed, cooling just enough to unclench my jaw.

I half-turned, confused, only to meet Valeria's eyes.

They were rimmed with exhaustion, her face pale and drawn, but the focus in them was sharp enough to pin me in place.

Her left arm was stretched out, fingers pressed against the implant at my neck.

'Is she siphoning some of the heat...?' It was the only explanation that made sense.

And given it was her cybernetic arm—the same one she'd used to strip bare flesh off of her right one to summon that impossible serpent earlier—it didn't feel far-fetched.

Neither of us spoke.

We just stood there, shoulder to shoulder, as the overload in my cerebral link slowly bled away. The searing heat cooled, dropping back down to levels that weren't cooking me alive from the inside.

Maybe it had already burned through all the surrounding tissue—maybe there wasn't even anything left to hurt—but for the first time since [Venombite] had gone off, I felt like I could actually breathe again.

Another minute dragged by in tense silence before I finally caught it—the faint shuffle of boots and gear from the hallway.

My whole body went rigid, every muscle pulling tight like a bowstring and my hand instinctively trying to go for the knife at my back that wasn't there.

"It's fine," Valeria said quietly, her voice steady despite the exhaustion still evident on her face. "They are EtherLabs."

For a split second, I almost asked how she could possibly know that. Then it clicked.

The passive jam must have burned out by now. Comms would be live again.

Even without [Serenity], anyone could have pinged for updates by now, and Valeria *always* had her channels open.

Of course she'd know if EtherLabs had finally sent reinforcements.

I let out a shaky breath I hadn't realized I'd been clinging to since Nyxstalker had stormed out after Mr. Stirling. Part of me had been sure it was only a temporary pause—that he'd come back through the breach any second to finish what he started.

But this? This felt final.

With EtherLabs security sweeping the floor, even someone like him couldn't keep pushing.

There was a reason he'd been so desperate to break Valeria fast, why he'd rushed to torture Gabriel and me before the jam expired.

Still, my mind snagged on the gap in the story.

'What the hell happened out there?' The System had thrown an error—clear as day, indicating that Mr. Stirling was gone—but Nyxstalker hadn't returned either. *'Did they kill each other? Or did he just vanish after realising his time was running short...?'*

It was impossible to know from where I stood, staring out through the gaping kitchen breach.

The opposite wall of the hallway was scarred black with scorch marks, riddled with bullet holes, streaked with blood and chunks of debris.

A mural of past violence, but no real answers.

I was half-inclined to step outside and look for what had happened, but I knew better than to follow my own whim at this point in time.

Valeria knew how to handle EtherLabs personnel; I didn't.

The last thing I wanted was to be confused for one of the invaders and get shot wandering the hallways by the very security team meant to extract us.

The footsteps came first—heavy boots grinding against rockcrete, growing louder as they closed in. Debris crunched and shifted in the hallway, the sound of order reclaiming ground from chaos.

Behind me, I felt Valeria straighten.

Even with her right side dead weight, she pulled herself tall, her presence snapping back into something controlled and deliberate. I adjusted immediately, shifting my stance so her entire right side was shielded by me, exactly as she'd asked.

Moments later, they came through.

A squad of EtherLabs security—armoured head to toe, rifles and SMGs sweeping as they poured in through both the shattered doorway and the gaping wound in the kitchen wall.

They moved with textbook tactical precision, fanning out, clearing corners, barrels raised and ready to fire at a moment's notice—until they rounded the breach and their barrels landed on us.

They froze.

A low murmur of voices muffled by the helmets, before they continued.

They broke off around us, methodically clearing the wreckage of the apartment.

Every corner, every body, every room was called out and marked as clear.

And then, just as quickly, they withdrew again, boots carrying them back out into the hallway, leaving the ruined apartment oddly quiet once more.

A few more seconds passed before the next arrival stepped in through the kitchen breach.

He moved differently—still like a soldier, but also more like a man who knew he didn't have to clear rooms himself anymore unless absolutely necessary. Flanking him were two others, even more heavily armoured than the first team, their weapons lowered but ready.

High-Tier protective gear covered his body, reinforced yet elegantly sleek, but he held his helmet tucked under one arm.

His blonde hair was slicked back, his face cut sharp with lines of age and a grim, yet focused look plastered on his face as his eyes scanned the room. He approached us directly, boots steady against the broken tiles, stepping over the dead bodies of the corpo agents.

His eyes flicked briefly over me before locking firmly onto Valeria.

"Miss Vildea," he said, voice calm, authoritative, carrying the weight of someone used to being listened to. "It's good to see you're still in one piece."

Valeria didn't miss a beat. Even battered and bloodied, her voice cut sharp as glass.

"Captain Halveth," she addressed him by name, like it was obvious she knew it. "You may reserve your pleasantries. The fact that I am still breathing is no credit to EtherLabs' security protocols. Quite the opposite—I am markedly disappointed by the inadequacies demonstrated here tonight."

The man's jaw twitched, but he didn't flinch. "With respect, ma'am, this was an unprecedented breach. My men responded as soon as—"

"As soon as the jamming was cleared," Valeria interrupted smoothly, her tone slicing through his explanation. "Do not mistake my survival as a consequence of your response. The interval between the initial breach and your team's arrival was more than sufficient to annihilate not only myself but my entire family. That we are not dead is the result of my own intervention, not your department's."

Halveth's lips pressed together, but he held steady. "If I may, Miss Vildea, we need to establish precisely what transpired before further measures are taken. My men are still sweeping the floor, but your insight—"

"My insight," Valeria interrupted again, voice dropping into something almost predatory, "will be shared on a strictly need-to-know basis. For now, you will concern yourself with the immediate, tangible priority: Securing a medical evac for my son. He is in critical condition, and unless EtherLabs intends to *compound* today's failures with outright negligence, that process should *already* be underway."

Halveth's eyes flicked past her to Gabriel, pale and trembling on the floor, then back.

His throat bobbed once before he answered. “We’ll have him evacuated immediately. I’ll transmit the request personally.”

Valeria gave a small nod, then continued without missing a beat. “Good. Once that is underway, you will also note this for your after-action report: The assailants were not a rogue element, not freelancers, but a coordinated strike team from OmniWare Inc.”

The name jolted something loose in my head.

‘OmniWare, huh? So that’s the enemy here...’

They weren’t some small-time outfit.

OmniWare Inc. was one of the heavyweights in Neon Dragons’ corporate ring—major players in bionics, and equally entrenched in the medical tooling and pharmaceuticals tied to implantation.

Direct and natural rivals to EtherLabs’ own pharmaceutical pursuits.

I’d been turning over the question of who Nyxstalker had been working for inside my head, but now the pieces were at least starting to line up. It didn’t make it simple—if anything, it only opened more questions—but the picture was ever-so-slightly less murky than before.

“OmniWare?” Halveth echoed, disbelief sharpening his voice. His helmet dipped slightly in his hand. “You’re certain of that?”

“Do not insult me by questioning my assessment,” Valeria said, her words cracking across the Captain’s face like a whip. “Their squad composition, tactical doctrine, and most importantly, their commander, left little room for ambiguity. It was Nyxstalker himself.”

Halveth’s composure cracked for the first time, his brow rising sharply.

For just a moment, silence held.

“Nyxstalker...” His voice trailed off, then steadied again, though quieter. “That complicates matters.”

“Complications are your department, Captain,” Valeria pressed forward, never letting the silence grow into something that might undermine her. “Mine, for now, is the survival of my family, which—once again—was achieved not through EtherLabs’ intervention, but *despite* its absence. Ensure my son’s survival with the efficiency and efficacy I had once assumed you to be capable of, and perhaps there will still be grounds to rebuild confidence in your division.”

Halveth stood his ground, even under the weight of her words.

“You have my word, Miss Vildea,” he said, his tone firming. “Your son will be on the next med-evac out. And we will have full security control of this floor until the matter is resolved.”

“See that you do,” she replied, folding the words like a closing document. “After that, we will address the evident failures that have been laid bare tonight.”

Captain Halveth gave one last nod—short, clipped, all business—before sliding his helmet back on. Without another word, he turned and left, his two armored escorts falling in behind him like shadows.

The moment they disappeared through the breach, I let out a breath I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding. My shoulders sagged, the tension bleeding out of me all at once.

Having Valeria’s scalding words lashing past my ear wasn’t something I ever wanted to experience again, but I couldn’t deny it: She had been beyond impressive.

Even brutalized, bloodied and half-broken as she was, she had effortlessly seized the conversation and strangled it into her control.

Captain Halveth hadn’t stood a chance.

She’d verbally dragged him face-first across the whole megabuilding, and in the process, secured Gabriel’s evac and medical assistance.

For that alone, I was grateful.

“Seraphine.”

Her voice, quiet now, came from just behind me. I turned to see her slumping harder against the shattered plinth, holding herself upright more through will than strength.

“I will require your assistance once more,” she continued, her tone still carrying that polished corporate cadence even through the exhaustion. “We must relocate to an alternate locale. Once secure, we will address your injuries, after which you will rest while I manage the remaining elements of this situation.”

I opened my mouth, ready to protest—to say there was no way I was leaving Gabriel right now, no way I was just going to collapse into bed after *this*—but she simply raised her left hand, silencing me without effort.

“Don’t argue with me tonight, Seraphine. Neither of us possesses the energy for it.” Her eyes, sharp even through the exhaustion, held mine. “Gabriel will be cared for by EtherLabs. The security apparatus is clearly deficient, yes—but pharmaceuticals and medical care are our core competency. He will receive the highest standard of treatment we can provide. I will personally *ensure* it.”

Her gaze softened then, just slightly, in a way that caught me completely off guard. “You have done more than enough, Seraphine. You have done very well. Now allow me to do my part. My negligence has allowed this breach; it is my duty to rectify it.”

I froze, caught between the completely alien warmth in her voice, the unfamiliar weight of genuine praise, and the almost unnatural sound of her admitting fault.

Words failed me.

All I could do was nod, dazed, and slip an arm under her to help her move.

I had no idea what else to say or do.

Every step sent fresh waves of pain coursing through me, but I shoved it aside. As long as I kept moving, kept upright, I could keep going.

Valeria leaned into me as I guided her out through the kitchen breach, into the hallway.

We passed by the heaps of bodies she'd left behind—black-clad corpses sprawled where they'd fallen, the stench of blood and scorched flesh thick in the air—and pushed forward into the wide T-intersection I'd run through so many mornings for my Body grinds.

Then I stopped.

The hallway was a nightmare given form.

Absolute ruin stretched in both directions—bodies scattered like discarded dolls, some still intact, others torn apart into pieces that barely resembled human forms. Bullet holes chewed into every surface, the walls and doors of neighboring apartments blown open, chunks of rockcrete and twisted metal jutting out where explosions had ripped entire sections apart.

Debris crunched underfoot with every step, the air thick with dust and the metallic sting of copper from all the blood.

But that wasn't what had made me freeze.

It was the claw marks.

Massive, jagged furrows carved deep into the walls, running along the length of the corridor—evidence of the Nyxstalker beast's rampage. They dwarfed anything a man or weapon could've made, and the sight drove home the nightmare that had unfolded here.

Mr. Stirling and the handful of EtherLabs security he'd brought had fought *that*.

The floor was littered with the fallen from both sides—black-armored OmniWare operatives lying broken among EtherLabs corpses, their firefight etched into the walls in blood and fire.

My eyes snagged on a cluster of three EtherLabs officers near the far wall.

They stood silently, weapons lowered, holding vigil over the crumpled body at their feet.

Mr. Stirling.

His form was mangled almost beyond recognition.

His entire right side was gone—shorn away like something had taken a single, colossal bite out of him. Even the right half of his head was missing, leaving nothing but ruin.

And yet... there was a smile on what remained of his face.

A contentment that seemed impossible given the state of him, but there it was.

I almost couldn't look away. But when I finally did, I saw what the officers were there for.

They weren't just guarding his body.

They were carefully extracting something clutched tight in his remaining hand: A pitch-black cybernetic arm, its surface still slick with oil and blood.

Recognition hit me instantly.

'Nyxstalker's arm...!'

So that was why he hadn't come back.

Stirling hadn't just stalled him—he'd seriously *maimed* him.

Ripped his arm clean off and wounded him enough that Nyxstalker hadn't even bothered to retrieve it after Mr. Stirling's death.

A quiet whisper left my lips before I could stop it. "Thank you, Mr. Stirling."

Then Valeria tugged at me, her directions pulling me forward, guiding us past the carnage and deeper into the floor.

I let her lead—I didn't have it in me to do anything else.

The next minutes passed in a blur.

We entered another apartment, one already stocked with medical supplies that had clearly been staged ahead of time. Valeria patched me up as best she could, her movements shaky but precise, while I swayed in place, barely upright.

"Sleep," she urged, guiding me to the single bed.

My thoughts spun wildly, chasing themselves in frantic circles, but I knew she was right.

I needed to stop. To rest.

So I pulled up the Rest Function, set it for a solid eight hours, and let it take me under...