

Chapter 136 - Mixer

“Ya want a drink? I’m buyin’,” Cryo offered casually over his shoulder as we reached the bar.

I’d never been much for alcohol, and even now, in a new world, that hadn’t changed. But hell—I’d been through enough shit this past month. Maybe a flashy drink to celebrate wouldn’t hurt.

“As long as it’s alcohol-free, surprise me,” I replied, feeling oddly confident as the words slipped out. Making it into the OPN backrooms, becoming a licensed Operator after clawing my way up from rock bottom—yeah, I’d earned a bit of indulgence.

“Heh, sure,” Cryo acknowledged, then leaned over the bar and ordered something quietly for himself and, presumably, whatever drink he’d picked for me.

Barely a minute later—*what a crazy service!*—Cryo handed me my drink, a smirk twitching at his lips. He held a wide tumbler filled with a deep-blue liquid that sparkled faintly, like bottled starlight pulsing gently beneath his fingertips.

Mine, though? Mine was something else entirely.

A tall glass, filled with layers of softly glowing liquid that shifted smoothly through the entire neon spectrum as it ascended—greens, blues, reds, and purples—capped off by a snowy-white foam that glowed *intensely*, like someone had installed a thoroughly luminescent LED just underneath the surface of my drink.

“Whoa...” I breathed out, eyes wide in awe.

Lifting it carefully and inspecting it, I noticed the liquid inside had alternating bands of warmth and coldness, pulsing gently against my fingertips like some liquid neon heartbeat.

‘How the hell do they even make stuff like this? This is crazy...!’

A chuckle snapped me from my trance.

Cryo was watching me with his usual lopsided smirk, clearly amused.

I quickly schooled my expression back into neutrality.

“Glad ya like it,” he said, clearly pleased with himself. “C’mon.”

He led me back through the crowd toward a booth at the far corner of the room.

Mouse and Pina were already there, predictably mid-argument, both clutching equally flashy drinks—Mouse’s was a fizzing, electric-yellow cocktail crackling with faint static, while Pina’s series of seven short, squat glasses shimmered like molten chrome under the backroom’s lighting.

Cryo slid casually into the booth, nodding at Mouse and Pina.

I quickly took the spot beside him—across from Mouse just like the first time we met—carefully setting my glowing drink onto the table. The moment we sat, Mouse and Pina’s argument faded, curiosity overtaking their earlier irritation.

Pina cocked an eyebrow at Cryo, a questioning look clear in her eyes. Without missing a beat, Cryo nodded smoothly toward me, his lips tugging into a small, genuine smile.

“Officially part o’ the OPN,” he announced simply, raising his glass. “Welcome to the Operator Private Network, Ela.”

Mouse’s eyebrows jumped, a grin spreading over his face, while Pina looked genuinely pleased. They both quickly mirrored Cryo, lifting their respective glasses and cups toward mine, Pina dual-wielding shot glasses like her life depended on it.

My chest swelled with a warmth that I hadn’t really known it could produce, pride bubbling up as I lifted my own dazzling drink. “Thanks.”

Our glasses met with a soft, melodious *clink*, and I brought the cocktail to my lips for my first official taste of OPN backroom hospitality.

The smell hit me first—sweet yet crisp, like citrus and fresh mint mingling in the air, underlined by a subtle electric tingle that seemed to tickle the very back of my nose, halfway down my throat.

Curiosity more than thoroughly piqued, I took a good chug.

My eyes widened at the explosion of flavors and sensations.

That first layer—the blindingly white one—hit me like a blizzard.

It was ice-cold, almost painfully so, sending a sharp jolt down my throat like the world’s cleanest, most aggressive mint. But beneath that blinding chill, there was a crisp tang—something citrusy, like frozen lime zest mixed with the electric sting of carbonation and just a hint of something floral, maybe elderflower, or whatever version thereof existed here in this world.

It was intense and refreshing, thoroughly shocking my tastebuds—and brain—awake like a bolt of lightning straight to the tongue and prefrontal cortex.

As I tilted the glass further and the white layer passed, my eyes flicked down to try and match what I was tasting with what I was seeing.

Just beneath the white was a thin band of vivid cyan—glowing faintly like some kind of irradiated glacier.

The flavor was mellow—blueberries, maybe? No, something more artificial but still pleasant, like a high-end synth-fruit made to be more “blue” than any real fruit ever could be.

Sweet, slightly floral, and weirdly... *silky*.

There was also a subtle fizziness to it underneath it all, and a strange gelatinous texture that spread beyond the initial silkyness, almost like drinking a uniform layer of fruit pearls suspended in liquid.

Then, before I even had time to process even a fraction of the taste and texture explosion in my mouth, came the orange-gold layer—thicker, richer, and *distinctly* warmer.

The shift in temperature was immediate and it helped balance out some of the lightning bolt-like shock I had received from the first initial halo-layer, as I had dubbed it internally.

It slid down smoother, creamier, the taste mellowing out into something almost like vanilla with a hint of... Some kind of clove or star anise?

I blinked as the heat bloomed in my chest, not burning but comforting.

'I think I'm starting to understand why Cryo chose this one for me...' I thought at the feeling spreading through my chest, but it was quickly interrupted by the next layer hitting my tongue.

This layer—a deep, glowing violet—hit me with a strange, almost *smoky* tang.

Not unpleasant, but definitely unexpected and it wiped my thoughts clean.

It reminded me of burnt caramel and something woody, like a faint touch of smoked plum or maybe even how I'd imagine liquid incense to taste, if it wasn't beyond toxic.

That one was room temperature, a kind of grounding point between the chill of the upper layers and the heat below.

By the time I hit the last reddish layer near the bottom, my tongue was already doing somersaults trying to keep up.

This final layer was thick, syrupy, and *hot*—not quite soup-temperature, but close enough to burn ever-so-slightly just with its raw temperature.

It had a spicy kick to it, like cinnamon and pepper mixed with dark cherry.

It lingered on my tongue and throat, the heat curling slowly behind the rest of the drink like a smoldering ember left at the bottom of a firework.

I pulled the glass away, breath shallow, eyes wide, trying to process what the actual hell I had just consumed.

That hadn't just been a drink. That had been an entire culinary *experience*.

As my eyes finally refocused on the people around me, I realized—unfortunately with full, awkward clarity—that everyone at the table had been watching me.

Cryo sat there with a smug little grin that screamed "*knew you'd like it*". Pina looked like she was on the verge of outright cackling, and even Mouse, half-submerged in his own drink, had his eyes locked on me over the rim like he was watching the best part of a show.

“That... that was *awesome*,” I admitted, trying not to sound too breathless from the sensory overload. No point in pretending I hadn’t just had my mind blown by a damn drink. Turning to Cryo, I nodded toward my glowing cocktail. “What’s it called?”

That was apparently the cue, because Pina let out a loud cheer and Mouse clinked his glass against hers, both of them toasting with unfiltered glee before taking healthy swigs. Even Cryo raised his own glass lazily and took a long chug before finally answering, his voice casual and easy.

“That’s the ‘*Rainbow Welcome*.’ Kinda tradition ‘round here,” he said, the relaxed smile on his face a surprising contrast to his usual gruffness. “You’ll find it all over the city—not just in OPN bars. Comes with or without the booze, but in here? It’s what we hand out to folks who just got their card. Welcome-to-the-club sorta thing.”

I gave a small nod to show I was listening, but my eyes were already drawn back to the drink in front of me—still faintly glowing, still layered like some kind of liquid puzzle.

‘That’s not the whole story though, is it, Cryo?’ I thought, narrowing my eyes slightly as I turned the glass in my hand. *‘You picked this one because I said “no alcohol,” specifically. Every part of it... it’s doing the opposite of what booze does. I feel more awake, more grounded. The heat in my throat and chest isn’t burning—it’s sharp, in a good way. Like it’s clearing a fog I didn’t know I had. This thing’s **the** anti-alcohol. Perfect for someone who doesn’t drink at all.’*

“The version with booze is different, isn’t it?” I asked, looking over at Cryo.

He didn’t answer right away—just smiled.

That same slow, knowing grin he wore whenever he was three steps ahead of the rest of us.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “Same look, same feel. But completely different effect. Still same coloured layers, still same temperatures, but the whole vibe’s flipped. Milfena Xernia really outdid herself with this one—easily one of the most finely crafted drinks in the whole city.”

That name drop nearly made me choke on my own spit, and I quickly had to take a sip of my drink to mask my reaction.

‘Mulfena Xernia?!’

That wasn’t some throwaway NPC in the game—she was *the* name in mixology.

According to the lore I remembered, she owned over a quarter of all the bars in Neo Avalis and had created more than four hundred unique drinks—each with their own effects, buffs, or weird little quirks.

She wasn’t just some background figure either.

In the world of mixology, and the overall lore of the world, she was a straight-up Legend—maybe even a Transcendent, just a step below Kill Joy himself, depending on which wiki article you referenced.

Word was, she'd been the first person to actually crack the code on applying buff effects through crafted drinks. Like, literal Game System-recognized effects, not just mood boosters. Like straight up Attribute, Skill increases or unique Effects entirely.

What made it even crazier was that her recipes could be followed by even low-level bartenders and *still* work—just less potent, obviously.

She'd basically codified the creation of cocktails as buff items. Willed them into being a mechanic by sheer genius and stubbornness alone.

'And I just drank one of her signature cocktails,' I thought, staring at the layered concoction in my hands with a new kind of reverence.

Immediately, my mind jumped gears. *'There's definitely Anima involved. There's no way drinks like these could have real buffs or effects without it. Did she write her own Anima-language—like Cyber, but for bartenders? Maybe it's about ritual-like movements or exact ratios, each step a part of some complicated Anima-infusion...? Miss K called the stuff I learned from Mr. Shori "sigils", so it'd totally make sense for precise patterns in mixing drinks to be able to trigger something similar, no...?'*

At the same time, another corner of my brain went full power-gamer mode, already plotting how I might get my hands on a [Mixology] Skill—because there was zero chance it didn't exist here, even if it hadn't been part of the original game.

[Cooking] hadn't been in the game either, yet here it was.

With Anima, [Cooking], and Mi.Xer's—she always insisted on that handle in lore—legendary drink effects all being *very real* in this world? The System would've never let something as fitting as [Mixology] slip by.

The ice-bucket of logic dumped itself over my head, snuffing out the excitement before it could build into anything dangerous. As cool as [Mixology] sounded, I had to be real with myself—it wasn't in the cards anytime soon.

'No Skill slots left, and I sure as hell don't have the spare Creds to be throwing around on a vanity pick like this... I already dropped [Tailoring] for being too impractical for the exact same reason, and my [Cooking] progress has been basically dead ever since I stopped visiting Mr. Shori regularly...' The thought made me frown for half a second, before I shook it off and glanced back at the table.

"So, when are we getting paid, Cryo?" I asked, deciding that being upfront about it would go over fine with this crew.

My [Negotiation] perk even gave me a tiny mental nudge of approval.

"Yeah, Boss! Where's our damn Creds at?!" Pina jumped in without missing a beat, delivering the line with the righteous fury of a rebellion leader demanding justice.

I snorted, caught off guard by the sheer *intensity* in her voice.

Cryo just lifted his hands like a man falsely accused. “Don’t be askin’ me. Wasn’t my gig. Mouse’s the one with the slip.”

Pina blinked, the realization hitting her like a truck. I had also forgotten that minor detail.

“Mouse, you piece of human dreck, where’s my money?! I swear to fuck I’ll rip out your stupid wires if you’re holding out on me!” she barked, lunging half across the booth.

Mouse squawked and flailed, using his gangly limbs to keep her at bay without budging too much from his seat. “Creds are coming, creds are coming! Chill, you ‘Borg-ass blank! Leave my damn wires alone!” he yelped, eyes flashing yellow a second later.

[“Mouse” has transferred {c}350 to your account with the note: “Don’t forget about my Blip!”]

I couldn’t help but grin—partly at the chaos unfolding around me, partly at the fat chunk of Creds that had just landed in my account.

Sure, {c}350 might not’ve been the biggest payout I’d ever seen, but for something as low-effort as that gig had been? Hell, it barely clocked in at an hour’s worth of work, drive to-and-from included.

Compared to my only other source of semi-consistent income, which was my work at Mr. Shori’s, this felt like I’d just been handed money for breathing. And don’t get me wrong—I was still grateful as hell for everything I’d learned at the old man’s place—but this was definitely different.

This was *real* Operator work.

Actual income I had properly earned, not just been given because somebody felt bad for me.

‘If I’d soloed that thing, I’d be sitting on over {c}1,400 right now...’ I thought, the math hitting like a sweet uppercut to the dopamine center.

Having an OPN license, plus access to regular, decently paid work—even with the risk factor—opened doors.

A lot of doors.

And I was gonna have to start thinking seriously about which ones I wanted to walk through.

‘I never really thought about what came after I got the license, huh...?’ I leaned back in my seat, the weight of that realization settling in, as I took another sip of the *Rainbow Welcome*.

There was Miss K’s dojo—still a priority, both for the training and the obligations I had with her, considering all the Anima-related things we both kind of got entangled with.

Vega and the whole Valir bullshit still needed dealing with, once and for all.

Mr. Shori’s stall remained my best low-risk XP farm, and I wasn’t in any rush to say goodbye to the old man anyway.

And then there was Misha, of course. The Gryplik had more than earned my loyalty, and undying friendship, at this stage.

So yeah, Delta was still home base, even if the rest of the city was finally opening up to me.

But the bigger question now was simple:

‘What the hell do I save for first? Cybernetics? Bionics? Maybe Genetics...? Kenzie might have a lead or two on that front... Or maybe just some proper gear upgrades first? That probably makes the most sense—after all, I am still walking around in Pseudo-Tier 1, not even actual proper Tier 1 gear. If I want to take more risky gigs like this, I’ll need the extra protection...’

I was just about to go full spreadsheet-mode, flexing my [Accounting] a bit to detail where I could invest my hard-earned Credits in, when the table exploded into noise again.

Pina, apparently not done with her chaos quota for the night, was now trying to force a shot of molten chrome-looking liquor down Mouse’s throat. No clue what he’d done—or *hadn’t* done—to earn that honor, but the man was locked in a half-serious battle for control of his own esophagus.

“Quit squirming and take the damn shot like a real Operator!” Pina barked, practically climbing across the table. Mouse twisted sideways, one hand catching her wrist mid-air, the other holding his drink aloft like it was sacred.

Cryo, meanwhile, was just calmly sipping his drink, watching the chaos unfold like it was premium entertainment.

By now, I’d come to a pretty solid conclusion: This crew was completely, utterly unhinged.

And honestly? I was all for it.

‘What’s more cyberpunk than downing a rainbow-colored, chemically ridiculous cocktail while watching two wildly different—but equally cybernetically augmented—maniacs wrestle over a shot of glowing chrome sludge?’

I couldn’t come up with a single thing.

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We spent the next hour or so chatting about Operator life—mostly me and Cryo going back and forth, while Pina and Mouse occasionally threw in a comment or two when they weren’t busy arguing or distracting each other with whatever nonsense caught their attention.

I ended up learning a hell of a lot.

Stuff I hadn’t picked up from the game playthroughs—either because it hadn’t been part of the original game at all, or the players I’d watched just never bothered digging deep enough.

Whatever the reason, I was glad for the new intel.

Eventually, Cryo offered to drive me back to Delta.

Pina and Mouse got booted out along the way, one after the other, with Cryo not-so-subtly shoving them toward their respective stops.

Apparently, they lived somewhere along the same stretch of OPN office <> Delta.

The walk back through the Haze toward the Megabuilding felt a lot more bearable this time—mostly because I'd remembered to actually wear Misha's scarf properly.

The thick fabric hugged my face, filtering out the entirety of the grit and burn.

It had been part of the outfit I'd initially bought—and again in the replacement Misha had given me—but in all the nervousness of that first Operator meeting with Cryo, and the whole whirlwind of abruptly leaving the only place I'd ever really known in this world, I'd completely forgotten to actually use it once we had stepped out of Delta.

'Not having my throat scraped raw by airborne toxins really does make the city feel a bit more livable, huh...?'

By the time we hit the lobby, Cryo stopped abruptly and turned to face me.

"That's where we'll part ways, for now," he said with a nod, voice steady as always. "Was a pleasure, Ela. If ya ever need a Face, ya know how to reach me."

Pina, Mouse and Cryo had all shared their contact IDs with me, before we had left the OPN backroom on the way to our respective homes.

I nodded back, matching the tone. "And if you ever need what I've got—stealth, netrunning, stabbing—you do the same."

All things considered, meeting Cryo had gone smoother than I ever could've expected.

A few bumps along the way, sure, but it ended up being surprisingly low-stress overall... even kind of fun. If a good gig came around, I definitely wouldn't mind teaming up with the crew again.

"Will do. Stay sharp. Don't get yerself killed," he added, already turning on his heel to head back toward the car.

"Likewise!" I called after him, watching his silhouette fade into the Haze beyond the glass doors, leaving me standing there—alone again in Delta's lobby.

'Operator license acquired. Creds earned. Now all that's left is figuring out what the hell to do with the rest of my life.' I thought.

*'Simple as that. **Just** figure out the rest of my life...'*