

## **Chapter 126 - Runner**

I clamped down hard on every muscle group I could consciously control, using [Elemental Balance] to lock my posture into something close to indifferent.

No tensing, no wide-eyed flinch, not even a twitch. Just breathing, slow and even.

Still, the lack of reaction seemed to feed Cryo more than a confession or rebuttal would have.

“But it ain’t guilt that brought ya here, no...” he mused, voice low, casual—like he was just talking weather. “Yer too steady for that. But yer *definitely* worried about fallout. Obvious, that. The way ya were scannin’ the room like it owed ya money before we even started talkin’—good habit, sure. But ya need to dial back the spotlight while yer at it.”

I gave him a slow nod. No point lying when I wasn’t even being asked a question. Better to let the man think he was reading me like a book—which... To be entirely fair, *he was*.

Cryo leaned back again, swirling his glass before taking a healthy swig. “And judgin’ by the fact ya had Vega, of all people, personally walk ya in? *Has* to be gang business. Ya pissed off someone with weight in Delta, it went sideways, and ya walked outta the fire. They didn’t.”

Another sip. He was putting the picture together fast—and far too accurately for my tastes too.

“Wouldn’t be corpo—if it were, ya’d be gone already. Pulled under, cleaned up, case closed. Nah, definitely gang.” He muttered it again, quieter this time, like he was double-checking the puzzle against the box cover.

“But no guilt...” he repeated, tapping a finger against the side of his glass. “Now *that’s* what I find interesting. Maybe yer corpo family actually prepped ya right. Maybe ya’ve just got the knack. Either way, it’s rare. And the fact Vega brought ya *to me* instead of just pointin’ ya toward the OPN desk jockeys? That tells me ya ain’t lookin’ for some one-and-done thrillride. Yer lookin’ to build somethin’. Connections right from the get-go, maybe even become part of a crew.”

Then his eyes locked with mine. Direct, sharp—but not hostile.

“So. How’m I doin’ so far, girl?”

I had to admit, I was thrown off by just *how close* to the mark he’d landed with his guesses—assuming they *were* guesses.

That was still a big if.

For all I knew, Vega had fed him half of it ahead of time.

They both insisted they weren't tight, but I wasn't about to take that at face value. People lied about that sort of thing all the time.

Hell, I definitely would.

Still, even if Vega *had* given him a nudge, the way Cryo had broken it down felt too natural, too practiced to be just parroting someone else's words.

That kind of read came more from instinct—and experience.

Meanwhile, my [Negotiation] and [Deception] Skills were locked in a death match behind my eyes, both trying to hijack my mouth.

*'Admit to it, get him comfortable,'* [Negotiation] practically screamed. *'Build rapport, show you're reasonable, get in his good graces.'*

*'Yeah? And throw every piece of mystery you've got straight in the trash?'* [Deception] snapped back. *'No vagueness, no cover, no plausible deniability? Dumb move!'*

In the end, I picked the path that felt most practical: Confirm what he already assumed, and keep the rest locked down.

Cryo was working off a mental profile that *already* existed in his head.

I wasn't gonna shift that with a clever lie. Not now.

Better to own what I had to and steer around the rest.

"Pretty good," I said with a nod, letting a hint of wry amusement edge into my tone. "That a party trick ya pull on everyone, or just the fresh faces that look easy to impress?"

Cryo barked out a gravelly chuckle and lifted his glass again. "Ma bad, ma bad. Just a thing I do—bad habit, if ya will." He took a sip, then locked eyes with me again. "I'm what's called a 'Face' in the Operator world. Ya know what that is?"

I nodded right away.

Faces were the smooth-talkers. The negotiators.

The ones who met the Fixers, haggled the contracts, worked the crowds, and charmed or bluffed their way past biometric locks and armed guards alike. In short, the kind of person who could sell sand in a desert—while convincing the buyer it was imported and they were getting the deal of a lifetime.

Cryo being a Face made perfect sense.

From the way he talked, the way he moved, the way he'd peeled me open like a puzzle box the second I sat down.

And Vega knowing him directly? Yeah. Checked out if Cryo was a Face.

*'Not exactly shocking that my bargain-bin [Deception] wasn't cutting it then,'* I thought dryly.

Cryo chuckled again in that low, scratchy way of his. "Good, good... That saves me a lecture. Yer already a bit more up-to-date than most of the folks I meet for this sorta stuff."

He leaned back against the booth's padded wall and gestured toward me, expression shifting into something a bit more serious now.

"Alright then, girl. Sell me. What do ya have that makes Vega think yer worth draggin' all the way down here to me? And why, exactly, should I consider vouchin' for ya with the OPN and potential crews?"

My mind snapped to immediate, razor-sharp attention.

This was it—the exact moment I'd rehearsed over and over again for weeks, tweaking and polishing my answer obsessively. My sales pitch; my shot at getting into the Operator business, and finally making real headway in figuring out exactly where I belonged in this fucked-up world.

Taking a short, steadying breath, I dove in. "First off, stealth is my comfort zone. Sneaking around and staying under the radar is what I generally prefer doing. I'm solid at infiltration, quiet movements, surveillance—you name it."

Cryo's expression was unreadable, but attentive.

I continued without missing a beat, reaching into my backpack to briefly pull out my drone just long enough for Cryo to get a proper look at it. "I've got a drone, too—fitted with its own spoofer for those extra-tricky information gathering missions. Pretty handy for intel without putting my neck directly on the line."

Cryo raised an eyebrow at that, nodding slowly, clearly at least mildly impressed—exactly what I'd hoped for when I bought it.

Pressing onward, careful to keep my tone genuine instead of boastful, I added, "Physically, I keep myself in very good shape. I can outrun trouble, slip away quick if things get hairy. If it comes down to it, I *can* handle myself in a fight—though, honestly, I'd prefer to avoid combat until I get some better gear. Still, what I've got now is more than enough to deal with anything below Tier 1, so I'm hoping that'll be enough to keep me out of trouble for now."

Another raised eyebrow from Cryo—a good sign.

Clearly hadn't expected me to be running Pseudo-Tier 1-level equipment.

Finally, knowing I had to make it clear that I wasn't going to be dead-weight in combat and only aiming to get my skin out alive, I added, "As far as weapons go, if I do have to fight, knives are my specialty. Close-combat and throwing—I keep a full set of each on me at all times, and they're all proper Tier 1 grade."

Not totally sure how long I should keep going, I just kept stacking on whatever I thought might catch Cryo's interest.

“As you figured out earlier yerself,” I said, keeping my voice steady, “I’m not the type to break down if things get bloody. If it comes to kill or be killed, I’ll handle it. So you won’t need to worry about dragging me outta a firefight ‘cause I froze up or started crying over a body.”

What I didn’t say, of course, was that after-the-fact? Yeah, maybe I’d need a sit-down with a therapist.

But Cryo didn’t need to know that part.

He looked like he was about to lean forward, maybe to take back the reins of the convo—and that’s when I dropped the *real* pitch I had been working towards these past weeks.

“Oh, and I’m a *Runner*,” I added, trying not to sound like I was making too big a deal out of it. “Cyberspace, Quick-Hacks, bit of programming—done all of it. I actually just wrapped up a new quick-hack a while ago. Got it properly reviewed by someone who *really* knows their shit. It’s built to punch up hard, especially against borged-out targets. Real nasty stuff, single-target focused, stealth-layered, bypasses most ICE of targets that aren’t ready for it.”

I watched him carefully as I let that hang.

I was gambling a little here, hoping the honesty I’d led with so far had earned me enough credit for him not to dig too deep.

I wasn’t lying, of course, but I was definitely not telling the whole truth either.

If he asked who the “expert” was, things could get complicated fast. The only reason I’d gotten that high-level feedback was because of Kill Joy—and saying *that* meant admitting I had access to the SPG-01 shard.

Sure, it was an incredible resource. But it *was* still just a tutorial shard.

And I wasn’t about to build my rep on being the girl who got her chops from a glorified training sim, no matter how sophisticated.

But Cryo just... froze.

Not the kind of pause you’d expect from someone who was unimpressed or confused—but the kind where everything stopped like he’d just processed something way bigger than what I’d said out loud.

His eyes narrowed a bit, mouth drawn in a tight line as he stared straight through me.

Then, without a word, he gave the faintest nod to himself.

He downed the rest of his beer in one long, practiced chug, set the glass down with a soft *clink*, and stood up abruptly, the sound of his boots scraping against the floor louder than it had any right to be.

My shoulders tensed on instinct.

And then, without so much as a glance my way, he opened the booth door and *walked out*.

Just like that.

I blinked, completely caught off guard.

My brain scrambled into crisis mode, throwing red flags left and right. *'Shit, shit, shit! Fuck! Did I say too much?! Or not enough...? Did I push too hard? Did he want something else?! Was the quick-hack mention too much...?'*

My mouth went dry as I tried to run through alternatives to keep myself from panicking, *'Maybe I can try and track down Vega and fix this, or maybe I need to start from zero again and find another contact...? Or do I just ask about this whole office thing he was talking—'*

"Ya comin' or what, girl?"

The words cut clean through the storm inside my head. I flinched, jerking my head toward the voice—Cryo, already halfway across the bar, looking over his shoulder at me with a raised brow.

He wasn't annoyed. He wasn't even smug.

Just... Waiting.

Still thoroughly confused about what the hell was going on, I grabbed my backpack in a hurry and hopped out of the booth, my body moving before my brain had fully caught up.

I trailed after him, weaving through the other patrons of the Valedictorian, some of whom glanced our way but clearly didn't want to get involved.

Cryo didn't slow down.

He moved all the way to the opposite end of the bar, stopping in front of another private booth—this one tucked into a slightly recessed section of the wall, just enough to feel a bit more exclusive.

He knocked twice, waited, then once more.

And then we waited.

Seconds passed—just a few—but each one dragged like a full damn *minute*. My nerves were absolutely vibrating as I tried to wrap my head around what was going on.

And then, with a quiet *click*, the booth's divider slid open.

Cryo slipped inside without hesitation, casting a casual gesture behind him with two fingers for me to follow.

So I followed.

The booth was a little larger than the one we'd just left—spacious enough to seat six without elbow-jabbing anyone, though only two figures sat waiting as Cryo and I slid into place across from them.

"That's Pina," Cryo said, nodding toward the woman seated further in, diagonally across from me.

Though Pina was hard to miss, even if he hadn't pointed her out.

Heavier-set, with the kind of solid and intense presence that made her feel even bigger than her already large size. But it was really her arms that caught my eye first—both cybernetic, fully exposed, no synth-skin in sight: A gunmetal base with visible plating seams, servo joints that hissed faintly every time she moved, and fingers that looked like they could punch through concrete without slowing down.

The forearms had a series of etched engravings—something between tribal ink and schematic etchings—running from wrist to elbow.

One arm had a stylized snake coiling up around it, carved *straight* into the alloy. It looked weathered, like it'd been done ages ago and touched up more than once by a variety of different people, if I had to guess.

Her hair was a short, choppy pixie cut, dyed a bold cherry-red that clashed strangely well with her olive-toned skin and the raw steel of her arms. There were faded tattoos visible on her neck too, peeking just above the collar of her loose, tactical-cut jacket.

"And that's Mouse," Cryo added without giving me a moment to respond, jerking his chin toward the guy sitting directly across from me.

As for Mouse... yeah, the name kinda fit.

He was undeniably tall, even hunched over like a goblin like he was right now, wiry—practically swimming in a ratty, oversized tech-jacket that looked like it had seen more solder burns than laundry cycles.

His head was the first thing that caught my eyes, as it had clearly lost the "mostly organic" game a while ago.

Entire sections of his skull had been replaced with exposed circuitry—wires crisscrossed above one temple and fed into a small port that glowed faintly, tucked behind his ear. A small cluster of some sort of chipset was visible just above his left brow, half-embedded like someone had tried to cram a whole circuit board into his head, only gotten about 30% through and then called it a day.

His eyes were unmistakably cybernetic as well, glowing a muted amber and ringed with tiny focusing servos that whirred softly every time they adjusted. I could even make out some of the internal wiring behind the lenses, too—no synth cover, no aesthetic smoothing.

Just pure function over form.

Furthermore, both of his hands were fully replaced as well, knuckle joints exposed, fingers skeletal and a little twitchy, like they were always processing a command two steps ahead of his brain, clinking on the table.

The first thing that hit me, seeing both Pina and Mouse up close, was how none of their chrome screamed high-end.

If anything, it all looked solidly mid- to low-tier—efficient, functional, and probably either custom jobs or the kind of gear you pulled from a salvage pile and tuned until it worked slightly better than factory.

Not flashy. Not polished. Just... *used*.

Maintained with grit and elbow grease instead of Creds.

Compared to the high-grade shine that Tom rocked, or Jin's clean corpo-issue bionics, it was night and day—five-star tasting menu versus a burger stand in a back alley.

But I could definitely imagine the burger still hitting.

"Name's Ela, nice to meet you," I offered with a quick nod, figuring I might as well break the silence since Cryo seemed content to let it hang.

Mouse twitched at the sound of my voice, like I'd just triggered a proximity alarm in his brain.

His eyes jerked over to me, zooming in so hard I could almost hear the micro-servos hum faintly from across the table. He scanned me head to toe with zero shame, then nodded, like he'd just verified I was real. His voice came out low and grating, like sandpaper dragged across a synth speaker. "Likewise. Mouse, as Cryo already spoiled..."

Pina didn't even bother with pleasantries. She just stared at Cryo like he'd personally betrayed her and asked, "So... Why the corpo-girl, Cryo? What's going on here?"

*Corpo-girl?* That made me pause. Was my hairstyle that uncommon outside of Delta, or did I just have some kind of weird aura to people down here? Still, I bit my tongue.

"She's gonna join us on the next job," Cryo said casually, as if announcing I'd just signed up for a gym membership instead of a potentially lethal gig.

That caught me completely off-guard.

I didn't remember agreeing to anything. There hadn't even been an *offer* last I checked.

Pina recoiled like he'd slapped her with a live wire, giving voice to my own thoughts as well. "She... *What?!* When the fuck was *that* decided? I don't remember getting a damn message, you blank-ass fuck. Since when do we take random corpo kids on joyrides anyway? She at least pay well?"

I clenched my jaw at the way she kept talking around me like I wasn't even there, but I held off. I didn't know the dynamic here yet, didn't know how far I could push before something snapped.

Better to let Cryo take point—for now.

He didn't flinch under Pina's barrage. He just shrugged like this was all routine and leaned an arm across the table, his voice calm and straight to the point.

"She brings everythin' we're gonna need for the next gig. It's recon-focused, eh? Info-gatherin' first, cleanup second *if* necessary. Girl's got the skills, wants to get into the Operator game, so why not test the waters with somethin' that plays to her strengths?"

He nodded toward me. "She's got her own drone, even fitted with a spoofer. Not somethin' we have. Good eyes, good ears, and more importantly—quiet. Somethin' ya don't have. Won't make waves unless we need her to. Somethin' neither of us are good at. And lastly, Runner stuff's not mine to judge anyway," he added, looking to Mouse with a pointed expression. "That's yer department."

At the mention of runner work, Mouse immediately perked up like someone had hit a power button on the back of his neck. His spine straightened, and those zoom-lens eyes locked onto me again.

The same full-body scan as before, but this time slower, more deliberate.

I could almost *feel* his curiosity crawling up my skin.

A slight shiver ran down my back—like being dissected with a smile.

While Mouse studied me like a new motherboard, Cryo kept talking, giving a quick summary of what I'd told him in the booth: Stealth aptitude, recon skills, solid gear, self-made quick-hack tuned for punching up. Not flashy, but efficient.

Pina's reaction changed with every sentence—her skepticism fading with each bullet point, her eyes darting towards me every time, like she was trying to spot the things Cryo was saying for herself.

I could literally watch her expression thaw into something closer to cautious interest, then grudging approval. It didn't look like she was even trying to hide it, either.

Her face was basically an open book.

Mouse, though, had clearly latched onto one thing and one thing only.

"So... you an aspiring Runner then, eh?" he rasped, voice full of strange energy, eyes whirring softly as they readjusted their focus.

"Your own quick-hack? That's a bold claim... I want to see. Show me..."