

Chapter 188 - Counsel

By the time I'd helped finish up at Mr. Shori's, it was already late in the evening and well past high time for me to get home. The prep rush had run long, the way it sometimes did when the early crowd hit harder than expected, and by the end of it my feet were quietly lodging complaints that I was choosing to ignore.

To say I was exhausted would've been a bit of an understatement, if not by much.

*'What a day... Or **days**, I guess.'*

I'd finally had the peace of mind to check the time and date during prep and confirmed what I'd half-suspected: The entire Operator-gig debacle had eaten almost a full day.

A day and a half since I'd last been home, when I added it all up properly.

'Really hope Valeria isn't going to be mad... I wonder if she even noticed, considering how rarely she's actually home.'

The answer came fast.

The apartment door slid open—me already back in Sera-mode, having quietly dropped Ela somewhere around the elevator on the way up, the mental shift taking a few seconds considering how long I'd been in the other mindset—and there was my dear mother, sitting at the kitchen table with her datapad, the soft glow of it catching the sharp line of her jaw.

Perfectly composed, as always, like she'd already been sitting there for hours and had absolutely nowhere better to be.

I took a slow breath, took the situation for what it was, and stepped inside.

Then I walked straight past her without a word, headed for my room, shoulders braced for the impact of a question or a look or that specific tone she used when she'd already decided how a conversation was going to go.

And... It didn't come.

Valeria did not speak up, ask me to wait, nor demand any explanation for what I was wearing or where I had been.

'Huh?' The door clicked shut behind me. 'That... was surprisingly simple.'

It didn't mean I'd dodged the conversation entirely, of course—more that she was being gracious enough to let me at least get into something that wasn't Operator gear before it happened.

So I pulled the DuraPack off my shoulder, set it down carefully, and started methodically stashing everything away—drone, katana and all—before swapping into more comfortable

at-home clothing, not rushing anything to buy myself a few extra minutes of “normal” before whatever inevitably came next.

By the time I stepped back out of my room—comfortable clothes, gear stowed, katana hung with its sheathe into the wardrobe and out of immediate sight—Valeria was still at the table.

Datapad in hand, posture exactly as I'd left it—which I remarked looked incredibly refined, despite the still slight tilt to it all from her lasting injuries—like the intervening five minutes hadn't registered as anything worth acknowledging.

She looked up when I came in.

"Welcome home, Seraphine."

"Mother." I gave her a nod—genuine, actually, because whatever else today had been, walking through that door and finding the apartment in one piece with her sitting in it had produced a strange kind of relief I wasn't going to examine too closely.

'Being even remotely relieved to see Valeria will never not feel weird...'

I pulled out the chair across from her and sat.

She didn't put the datapad down.

'Casual, then. Good.'

A few seconds of quiet passed before she finally spoke.

"A new acquisition?"

"Partial payment," I replied right away, figuring there wasn't much point in being coy about the Operator side of things at this stage.

She'd almost certainly worked it out long before now—and if she hadn't *before* the whole Nyxstalker situation, she'd *definitely* nailed it down the moment she'd personally delivered my entire Operator setup to my room: Pseudo-Tier clothing, DuraPack, drone, knives and all.

That wasn't something your average daughter should be having at my age—or should even be knowing about existing to begin with.

She, meanwhile, made a small sound of acknowledgment and returned to the datapad.

"You were gone for quite a while," she said, her eyes still on the screen. "Any issues that arose on your outing?"

The fact that she didn't look up, I took as a good sign—some version of trust that hadn't existed even just a few weeks ago, where she didn't feel the need to keep me in her eyeline to catch the tells. Our last real conversation had clearly done a lot of work for whatever this strange, fucked-up relationship of ours *actually* was.

Which I was definitely not going to put any kind of name to anytime soon—I'd require a whole practice of psychologists and psychiatrists to work through that tangle of bullshit before then.

I let out a quiet breath in reply, because where did I even fucking start on this mess?

I took a few seconds, ran it through [Deception]—not to lie outright, just to find the right level of honesty that was least likely to set off alarms.

There was a *lot* to work with here and most of it needed to stay as far from Anima as possible. The absolute *last thing* I needed right now was for Valeria to glance at me with her Anima Sight and see the damage sitting in my Network like a crack in a load-bearing wall.

'Give her things to think about... Small things. Enough of them that the bigger things stayed buried.'

"Quite a few," I ultimately admitted.

She looked up at that, her gray-steel eyes finding mine across the table with the same kind of sharpness behind them they always carried.

"The gig wasn't marked properly," I explained at the wordless prompt. "OPN messed up. Led to some very close calls, but my equipment handled most of the fallout for me—I was properly prepared. Ripper fixed up a few cracked bones, some cuts and bruises—I'm operational."

I paused briefly, realising that I was hovering between corpo-speak and my more casual one, not entirely sure which one I should be leaning into with her anymore. Deciding that it wasn't worth messing the delicate conversation up over right now, I continued anyway.

"The crew I ran with, though..."

I let it trail off, genuinely unsure how much of that particular thread I wanted to pull on.

"The OPN made a mistake...?" She repeated, every word measured like she was closely examining them individually. Her eyes stayed on me for a moment longer, then dropped back to the datapad—though the quality of her attention hadn't fully returned to it. "That is quite unusual."

"Yeah," I nodded. "It is."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she added, with the precise, unhurried diction she used when she was moving into territory she actually knew well:

"Make sure to inform your Face—should they still be alive and capable—to file a claim for negligent misrepresentation. The OPN failed in their due diligence to verify the accuracy of the contract information provided, which directly resulted in harm to the contracting parties."

She turned a page on the datapad without looking up.

"Alongside that, a claim for consequential damages—covering Ripper fees, equipment loss or degradation, and any ancillary financial fallout that resulted directly from their error. And a third claim for breach of duty of care, which covers the ongoing mental overhead imposed on the crew going forward—the erosion of institutional trust means every future contract will require additional verification efforts and carry elevated psychological costs. That burden has a specific value that you are entitled to."

She glanced up briefly.

"They may contest one or more of those. File for all of them regardless. You will always recover more by claiming everything claimable than by pre-emptively conceding anything."

It took me an embarrassingly long moment to realize my mouth had opened on its own accord through that piece of advice.

*'Right... Corporate litigation. Contracts, claims, damages—this is Valeria's **entire** native ecosystem, isn't it...?'*

I'd walked into that one completely unprepared and come out the other side with what was functionally a free legal consultation by probably one of the best people I could possibly receive it from in this regard.

I already had a note file open in my cerebral interface before she'd finished the last sentence, mentally typing along as fast as I could without making it obvious that I was mentally typing as fast as I could.

I'd send it to Higgins as soon as I was back in my room—and probably to Reina too, because if anyone was going to make sure Higgins actually filed everything rather than waving it off—which I had no reason to believe, but it was better to be thorough—it was going to require external pressure applied *directly* and *repeatedly*.

Which I had no doubt Reina would gladly be responsible for, given everything.

'Maybe I'm actually going to see some Credits on the other side of this disaster after all,' I thought, and found it was genuinely possible to feel slightly better about the whole thing.

"Thank you," I said, and meant it genuinely. "That's—really useful. I wouldn't have known where to really start with any of that."

Valeria did not respond.

She returned her attention to the datapad with the smooth, unhurried motion of someone filing a completed task. The expected reply of a woman who did not consider gratitude a conversational contribution worth processing.

And yet...

I was probably losing it.

Exhaustion, adrenaline crash, the general accumulated toll of a day and a half that had involved more near-death experiences than I was comfortable tallying—any of those would have been sufficient explanation for why I thought I saw *something* flicker across her eyes in the half-moment before she looked back down.

'I'm almost certainly imagining things...'

The silence that followed was comfortable enough—or at least functional, which for Valeria was roughly the same thing.

She turned another page on the datapad.

I sat with the note file still open in my interface and double-checked that I had written down everything Valeria had said for Higgins to claim with the OPN.

"Your preparation for the outing," she said, after a while, still not looking up. "Walk me through it."

I answered honestly, because there wasn't a particular reason not to that I could find.

"I saved and spent everything I made at Mr. Shori's before I took any gigs that had real danger attached to them," I said. "All of it went into the gear you saw. Pseudo-Tier 1 and Tier 1 where I could manage it—clothing, DuraPack, drone, knives... I also went into debt briefly with my supplier to cover one upgrade I really wanted to have before heading in. I didn't want to go in under-equipped if I could help it."

A small nod was her only reply. Still reading.

"The crew?"

"Solid. Experienced. Came recommended through a contact I trust." I thought of Higgins, Takeda, Reina. Kaito bleeding against a wall and still running tactical assessments. "They knew what they were doing. The problem wasn't exactly the crew."

"The equipment held, then."

"Mostly. The Ripper covered the rest."

Another page turned, then she added, "And your Runner activities specifically? I assume that was your main role for the gig?"

That one landed wholly differently in shape, the way her questions always were when she already had a hypothesis she was checking against.

'Ah—Of course. She saw the deck. Nobody but a Runner would have one,' I realized after a brief moment of panic. *'In hindsight, I really should have figured she had an exact read on my role, just based on my equipment alone...'*

"The SPG-01 shard," she said. "The one Gabriel arranged for you. It would appear the investment has borne fruit."

"It has," I said, and nodded.

She made a sound—a hum.

Sounding low, brief and *genuinely* intrigued, in a register I had never once heard from her before. It was small enough that I might have missed it if I hadn't been paying attention.

But it was very obvious that something was off today.

She was very different from usual tonight.

Not different in any dramatic or alarming way—still Valeria, still composed and poised at every turn, still with that sharp undertone beneath everything like she was running assessments on everything in the room simultaneously.

But the needling precision of her usual attention was dialed back a *lot*.

She was sitting across from me at her own kitchen table with a datapad and having what was, by any reasonable measure, a fairly normal and *casual* conversation.

It was beyond strange, to say the least. It was also, however, genuinely nice.

She looked up again. "Where did you find the deficiencies?"

"Subroutines," I said, immediately. "And segment-based quick-hacks specifically. Elevators were a problem—and I had nothing for communications lockdown. If I'd had any kind of jamming capability going in, the whole gig would've been different."

I shook my head slightly.

"We didn't have any reason to expect the Scavs had backup, of course. But if I'd had the *option* to lock down comms as a precaution regardless, I would have. That's the kind of thing that shouldn't be a gap for a Runner trying to sell themselves for gigs."

Valeria absorbed that with a slow, single nod—seemingly running the logic and finding it sound. Then she said: "I will add a shard to the remuneration package. Several items in that category—communications disruption, access control, a few adjacent utilities. Consider it part of the settlement we agreed on. Instead of one of the Knowledge Shards. It should prove more immediately useful to you."

I *stared* at her, my mouth slack for the second time today.

The remuneration had been supposed to be knowledge shards, nothing more. That had already been more than I'd expected from the conversation that had produced it.

This was—that was a rather *significant* addition, given that I doubted Valeria would hand me bottom-tier trash in terms of quick hacks. This was the kind of addition that would undoubtedly have taken me a *very* long time to build toward on sixteen Credits, Mr. Shori's part-time wages and the gigs that had, so far, a 50/50 chance of going tits-up.

"Thank you," I said, and heard the genuine weight in it even as I said it.

She looked back down at the datapad.

That flicker again—I saw it. The same small, ephemeral thing across her eyes that had no business being there and was gone before I could actually truly identify it.

I filed it away and said nothing, because I had no idea what to do with it and bringing it up felt like trying to catch smoke, or worse. I still had things to bring up and ruining the casualness of the conversation would not be conducive to that.

I let a beat pass, then pulled up the list I'd been mentally assembling for the last several weeks.

"While we're on the topic of the remuneration," I said, carefully. "There are a few other shards I'd like you to consider."

She waited attentively.

"First-Aid," I said. "Comprehensive—covering both treating others and myself. Ripping and Slicing after that, in that order of preference." I kept my voice level. "The last gig made it *very* clear that whatever I've picked up on the medical side so far isn't enough. I need actual skill, not just improvised guesswork."

A nod that I chose to interpret as acknowledging a good choice. "Noted. I will endeavour to see it done."

"Jury-Rigging," I continued. "Working with limited resources, field repairs, improvising solutions under pressure. That one showed up as a gap too."

Another nod, this one slightly more hesitant.

I paused for half a second, then finally added: "And Corporate Etiquette."

Valeria looked up immediately.

The eyebrow that moved was slight—barely anything, by most people's standards.

By Valeria's standards it was the equivalent of her jumping from her chair.

She held my gaze for a moment, clearly searching for something inside my eyes, likely deciding whether what I had just said warranted a counter-question.

She ultimately decided it didn't.

"I will consider it," she said with that ever-measured tone of hers, and returned to the datapad.

I let myself breathe out quietly.

She turned a page without looking up and commented, "The pistol you requested is currently in the process of being whitelisted for the Megabuilding as well. I have arranged for a

shooting instructor. You will receive the specifics within the next few days—timing, location, contact details."

"Thank you," I said, and the words came out with the same genuine weight they had the first two times, which was doing something uncomfortable to my internal equilibrium, because I did *not* have a lot of practice thanking Valeria and actually *meaning* it three separate times in one conversation—or ever.

Apparently it was doing *something* to hers as well.

Her hand moved sharply right away—datapad and all—like she was cutting off a line of conversation before it could fully establish itself in canon.

"Appreciation loses its edge," she said, "when it is dispensed freely and without purpose. I am keeping to the terms of the agreement we reached. Nothing more."

The datapad settled back into its previous position. "I would strongly suggest reconsidering the frequency and frivolous usage thereof going forward."

The words had the general shape of a correction. Valeria reminding me of where the lines were, re-establishing a distance I'd apparently been quietly closing without her consent.

Except...

There was something *missing* from it.

Some underlying quality that her *corrections* usually carried—the precise, calibrated edge that made them land like a door closing shut—wasn't fully there.

The words were right. The delivery was *almost* right.

Which, for Valeria, was about as much of a tell as she could possibly give.

I nodded, and decided that pointing out the gap between *what* she'd said and *how* she'd said it was not a move I was going to make tonight.

"Understood," I said instead, and left it at that.

A moment passed with no real communication between the two of us.

'*She's in a good mood,*' I thought, or at least the closest approximation of a good mood that Valeria was capable of. '*She's being generous. She's engaged... She hasn't looked at me like I'm a particularly disappointing quarterly report even **once** tonight. Shoot your shot, Sera... It's probably the best time you're ever gonna get for this.*'

I took a deep breath.

"There's one more thing I'd like to bring up," I said. "If you'll hear it."

She waited, datapad still in hand.

"The birthday request," I said. "The one you and Oliver offered me at that first dinner after I woke up."

The datapad went down onto the table.

Not merely set aside but placed, flat on the table, with the deliberate weight of someone clearing the deck. Her full attention came up and settled on me with a complete, unpartitioned focus

I kept going before I could lose the nerve.

"The gig was far too dangerous," I said. "I knew going in that it would be dangerous to some degree, and I'd prepared as well as I could. Good crew, solid gear, intel work before we breached. I did *everything* right that I could, more or less... And it *still* nearly went very wrong, several times. That's just the nature of it—I understand that. A single stray bullet from a Scav who got lucky, an enemy I didn't see or react to in time, one variable I hadn't accounted for... It's always going to be there, regardless of how much I prepare. And, surprisingly, I realize that I can live with that."

I met her eyes then.

"I'd just prefer to reduce those variables wherever I actually can."

Valeria's chin dipped slightly—a slow, minimal nod.

She was already running the calculations on what I'd request.

I practically could see it written behind her eyes.

"I've been investing *heavily* in my equipment to mitigate this," I continued. "Pseudo-Tier 1, Tier 1 where I can get it, the drone, the DuraPack. I went into debt to make sure I had what I needed before I walked into anything that could get me killed. Most Operators I've met aren't doing that—they're happy to lose parts of themselves and replace them with chrome and call it fine."

I shook my head slightly.

"That's not how I want to operate. I'd rather spend the Credits upfront and come back in one piece, every time. Upgrading toys and weapons is secondary to my actual survival. If I ever lose something as a result of unfortunate circumstances? Then so be it. But that's not my baseline. However... There's one part I can't keep protected, regardless of how much I invest right now. Not until I have *a lot* more to work with than I currently do: My head."

Nothing moved in her expression.

"I don't know what you and Oliver had in mind when you made the offer... I'm genuinely certain it wasn't *this*. But I'd like to ask for the funds to procure a Kinetic Resistance Mask from my supplier."

I kept my voice level, [Edge] doing its quiet work in the background, tamping down the nervous energy that wanted to express itself through my hands.

"If that's too expensive—and I honestly wouldn't be surprised if it was, honestly—then a Kinetic Dampening Mask instead. *Something* to cover the gap the rest of my equipment can't. So that one lucky shot from a random Scav isn't the thing that ends it."

Valeria simply looked at me.

The silence that followed was not comfortable—it had a certain weight and movement behind it, calculations running visibly inside her mind, working through everything methodically the way she always seemed to do.

I, however, held her gaze and didn't fidget, didn't fill the quiet with anything, didn't reach for a word to soften or pad what I'd already said... This was a [Negotiation] now and the first one to blink would lose.

She took her time, several minutes.

Then finally, she said, "Your general assessment is correct. Your current level of protection is not adequate for the category of dangers you are clearly willing to engage with."

She put in a measured and deliberate pause, tilting her head slightly. "I *had* considered, when you came through that door this evening, whether to forbid you from continuing your Operator activities entirely."

I kept very still at hearing those words.

"*However.*"

Her eyes stayed on mine. "You have demonstrated a level of considered preparation that I had not anticipated, given your prior history of recklessness. Your approach to equipment, your vetting of the crew—limited as your experience makes that process—and your evident willingness to not only identify but *address* your own mistakes rather than simply absorb them... I am positively inclined to agree to the request."

The breath I let out was larger than I would've liked.

"I *must* qualify, however," she continued immediately, "that the funds available will not extend to a Kinetic Resistance Mask. It will have to be the lower-tier option."

She held up one finger.

"Additionally—you will negotiate a brief inspection window with your supplier before the purchase is finalized. I will examine it *myself* to confirm it meets an adequate standard for what you'll be paying. If it does not, the deal is off."

"Agreed," I said immediately.

I heard it come out of my mouth and still couldn't fully process the fact that it was real.

'A Kinetic Dampening Mask...!'

An actual, functional piece of head protection that meant a stray round wasn't going to end everything before it had properly started. The upgrade that single piece of equipment represented was absolutely *enormous*.

Small-arms fire, knives, even blunt weaponry—it would all do nothing but give me a bit of a headache with the mask on.

I was aware, a half-second too late, that I had not managed to keep all of that off my face.

The faintest hint of something crossed Valeria's—not quite a smile, barely the shadow of one, gone before it had fully arrived.

Then her hand moved sharply again in that same way as earlier, the gesture that closed things.

"I have taken up enough of your evening," she said. "You are visibly exhausted. Get some rest."

She picked up the datapad.

"I also expect your performance at the Arkion Dojo to remain unaffected by your Operator activities. That *always* takes priority. The connections available to you in that environment are not incidental or a fleeting thing—they are paramount to your future. I *trust* that this is understood and need not be repeated."

"Completely," I said, and meant that one just as much as everything else, because I'd *already* been planning on exactly that.

The Dojo wasn't a side note at all. It never had been.

Valeria gave a single, final nod, eyes already dropping back to the screen.

I'd been dismissed.

I pushed back the chair, got up, and headed for my room—and made it the whole way there before allowing myself to properly register what had just happened.

A Kinetic Dampening Mask.

'Holy fucking shit,' I thought, and sat down on the edge of my bed with the quiet, slightly dazed energy of someone who had walked into a conversation expecting the executioner, only to come out as the damn princess. *'That's like—At least a thousand Credits worth of equipment. And that's not even counting the shards she is going to get me...!'*

Whatever had lifted Valeria's mood that day to allow for me to get away with everything that had just occurred, had done me *quite* the service...