Chapter 128 - Observation

I eyed Mouse's smoking corpse warily, trying to figure out what exactly went into accessing a dead runner's shard data.

'*People usually slot their shards in the neck, right…? I'll have to check there first, I guess…*'

But before I could really start spiraling about shard-necromancy based logistics, Cryo chimed in again.

"We'll want ya to get eyes on their cams, alarms, the whole lot. Keep 'em blind and quiet so they don't see us comin'. Should be right up yer alley, yeah?"

I paused for just a split second, because, sure, I'd never actually pulled off a hack outside of Kill Joy's tutorials—but I'd seen it done plenty of times in-game.

Plus, the second Cryo brought it up, something stirred inside the depths of my skull.

Bits of know-how filtered in from the various System downloads I had received, courtesy of my [Netrunning], [Programming], and [Quick-Hacks] Skills, reassuring me I *probably* had the basics down for that particular mission.

"Yeah, shouldn't be an issue," I replied confidently, forcing a casual nod. "Long as they don't have their own runner or any serious ICE installed."

Cryo smirked, clearly pleased by that answer.

He took another sip from his drink and casually continued, "Highly doubt it'll be an issue. They're low-level squatters, scavvin' in all the wrong places. Usually nobody bothers, but they stepped on the wrong toes recently, so now we're clean-up crew."

He fixed his eyes on me, growing suddenly serious, "Ya good with killin' 'em all, girl? Just makin' sure we got no misunderstandings here. We're gonna try makin' 'em leave nice 'n' easy first—Pina's gonna handle the negotiatin'. But if they don't cooperate, we put 'em down. Ya cool with that?"

And there it was.

The question I'd known would come eventually, but still dreaded actually hearing out loud.

My answer, at least on the surface, was simple: Yeah, I was completely fine with it.

Dead scavs didn't even move the needle on my moral compass.

I knew exactly the kind of twisted, fucked-up horrors they got up to, and wiping them out wasn't gonna cost me any sleep. They ranked below roaches as far as I was concerned.

But that wasn't the real question Cryo was asking me.

He wasn't asking if I'd be fine watching them die—he wanted to know if I'd be willing to put them down myself.

To take one of my knives, drive it into someone's throat, and rip it back out.

And that… Was a much harder question to answer.

Logically? Morally? I knew I wouldn't feel an ounce of guilt about removing them from the world. Scavs were parasites, predators preying on the weakest and lowest.

Ending them was doing society a favor. Plain and simple.

But that wasn't really the problem, was it?

The problem was whether I could actually *do* it knowing full well I wouldn't feel an ounce of guilt for it. That I'd go through the motions, end a life, and walk away just fine without a second thought.

That was the real thing clawing at the back of my mind.

'*Miss K made some damn good points… We don't get the luxury of hesitation out here. Can't keep dancing around this forever,*' I reminded myself, forcing her voice back into my head like armor. '*This is the job. Scavs are walking disasters. You wanna be an Operator? You're gonna have to pull the trigger eventually… Might as well be now, no?*'

I met Cryo's gaze again after a second or two of silence, squared my shoulders, and gave him a solid nod. "Yeah. I'm good with that. Got my knives sharpened, if it goes that way."

Across the table, Pina broke into a wide, toothy grin. Cryo, though, kept his eyes on me just a beat longer—like he was testing the weight of my words, looking for cracks.

Whatever he found, it seemed to satisfy him. He lifted his glass in a casual toast.

"Then welcome to the crew for this one, Ela."

"Welcome, lil' girl Ela!" Pina echoed with a laugh, raising her own glass.

I felt more than a little awkward—not just because I didn't have a drink to join in with, but because the whole thing felt a bit too much like a cheesy initiation ritual. I gave a stiff nod, trying not to look like I was dying inside, and prayed I wasn't going bright red.

Cryo and Pina downed the rest of their drinks in one go, slamming the empty glasses onto the table with twin *clunks*. Judging by the synchronized grins, this was a regular thing for them. Some kind of weird celebratory handshake, but with alcohol and minor cringe-based trauma.

"Alright, let's talk task," Cryo said, already brushing his empty glass aside as he pulled a datapad from somewhere—I still wasn't sure if it was from a jacket pocket or just thin air. "Like I mentioned earlier, Mouse has the job details stored—"

He didn't get to finish.

A godawful, rattling gasp tore through the booth like a broken air compressor suddenly deciding to breathe. I flinched hard, spinning toward the sound.

“Aaah!” Mouse croaked out, his voice scraping the very air like sandpaper.

“Holy *fuck*,” I breathed, watching his body twitch again. Then once more.

The way it moved wasn’t random—it had a rhythm to it. Pulses. Bursts. Like something mechanical was forcing his muscles to spasm.

Like something was forcing his heart to restart from a dead-stillness.

‘*No fucking way… A Lazarus Implant?!*’ my brain screamed, as my eyes flicked to the rising steam from his clothes, the slight whine of power surging through cybernetics trying to reset their sync with living tissue.

“Huh, about fucking time,” Pina muttered like she was watching a delayed vending machine. She gave him a light kick under the table, just as one did with a stuck piece of merch from one, grinning. “Thought the new girl might’ve actually scrambled him for good this time.”

Cryo just nodded, entirely unfazed. “Yeah, usually only takes a few seconds. That was a long one. Pretty nasty, that Quick-Hack of yers, Ela.”

I simply sat there like someone had just flipped the table upside down.

‘*What the actual fuck is happening right now?!*’

Mouse was convulsing back to life like nothing happened, Pina and Cryo were chatting like this was Tuesday, and I was honestly questioning every decision that had led me to this moment.

‘*Vega, what kind of absolute psychopath circus did you throw me into here…?*’

We all just sat there, watching Mouse’s body spasm a few more times like some possessed marionette, before he suddenly sucked in another gurgling breath that sounded like someone was choking on a vacuum hose.

A second later, he jolted upright and slammed the back of his skull into the booth’s wall again with a dull *thunk*.

“Woooohhhaaa!” he howled, eyes darting around like someone had kicked over a hornet’s nest in his skull. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*! Shiiiiiit that was *fucking great*, hoooo!”

He started smacking the sides of his own head, open-palmed and rapid, like he was trying to physically reboot his optics.

It wasn’t working.

His eyes kept flickering and twitching wildly, and he was laughing like a lunatic the whole time.

“Fried my fucking *eyes*, huh?! Hahahaha *heeee*! What a *fucking* quick-hack, girl!”

His volume was *absurd*—practically screamed every word—and I winced along with the rest of the booth as his voice cracked off the walls.

“Keep it the fuck down, ya blank-ass *fuck*,” Pina snapped, shoving him back against the wall with a solid *thud* that rattled his whole wiry frame.

“Huh?! *What?!*” Mouse barked, still yelling like he was trying to be heard over a riot. “Wait… Are my *fucking ears* broken too?! Ahhh shit man, that fucking *suuuuucks!*”

“Yes, you *damn blank*! That’s what happens when you let *random people* throw quick-hacks at you! Someday you *won’t* come back, you fucking moron!” Pina bellowed, now practically trying to out-yell a deaf man on purpose.

Cryo just dragged a hand down his face with a groan. “Just send ‘im a message, Pina. Mouse can’t hear ya, no matter how loud ya get.”

Pina blinked like she’d just been handed the most obvious solution in the world, snapped her fingers, and pointed at Cryo with mock awe before her irises turned a cool digital blue and she started typing something out.

And me? I was still stuck on the whole *"I just watched someone die from something I made and then come back like it was a party trick"* bit.

‘*Definitely not a Lazarus implant,*’ I realized, heart still hammering. ‘*No way these people are packing the kind of creds that takes. And it wouldn’t leave him blind, deaf, and halfway bricked like this either. This was definitely something else… Maybe a homebrew resurrection implant? Some kind of protocol he wrote…? Fragile, janky, and borderline reckless, but it damn well* ***worked****, didn’t it…?*’

The lore-nerd buried somewhere in me was dying to ask Mouse about everything.

How the hell had he survived that?
What had actually just rebooted in his system?
What *was* he running under the hood, and how much of it was homebrew insanity barely held together by duct tape and prayers?

But the logical part of me, the part that didn’t want to get ghosted on my first actual job, clamped down on that real quick. Asking a runner about the inner workings of their personal setup—especially one who just “came back from the dead”—was a one-way ticket to getting yourself accidentally “lost” mid-task.

Thankfully, Cryo seemed to be on the same wavelength. As soon as he saw my attention swing back his way, he picked up the conversation again like nothing had happened.

“AO’s around the Maneph District,” he said, tapping his datapad and pulling up a map of the district. “Real low-income area, mostly regarded as a complete shithole. Used to be a scav haven a while back, but all the bigger crews moved on when they figured out there wasn’t

anythin' worth pulling from people who can't afford proper replacements, let alone actual chrome."

I leaned in to get a better look at the map.

To my surprise—and quiet relief—it was an area I actually *recognized*.

Not intimately, but enough to have a mental layout: The architecture, the general street structure... It all triggered faint memories from the game.

'*Finally, some game knowledge that might actually be useful in here,*' I thought, eyes narrowing on the building outlines.

"Don't remember the exact headcount," Cryo went on, flicking through a few files, "but Mouse's shard should have the full details. Think it was somewhere in the ballpark of seven, maybe eight scavs or so. Nothin' we can't handle, assuming they're not sitting on a cache of stolen corpo-grade hardware or anythin'."

I nodded, committing everything to memory.

First job or not, this wasn't something I could afford to treat lightly. One slip, one misread hallway, and I'd end up in pieces in some scav's basement freezer.

"As for entry points," he added, "they'll be listed on the shard too. We've got a few options."

I rubbed my chin, thinking it over. "Any high ground? We got someone watching our six from up top? What's the entry plan look like, exactly? And what's the escape plan if shit goes sideways?"

Cryo raised an eyebrow at that, a grin stretching across his face before he chuckled. "Look at the new girl go. Tactical brain on ya, huh? I like it. Way better than the usual blank-slate bullshit I get."

He jerked a thumb toward Pina and Mouse, who were still locked in what looked like a silent shouting match over their neural links. Mouse kept twitching every few seconds like someone was hitting him with a cattle prod straight to the spine.

"Those two usually go with the ol' '*kick the door in and pray'* method," Cryo said with a snort. "Gets messy. Makes for good fireworks, sure—but I wouldn't mind tryin' somethin' a bit cleaner every once in a while, y'know?"

He leaned forward slightly, tapping the table once with his finger. "But that's kinda why I brought 'em for this one. Job ain't that complicated. Not really worth us goin' in all surgical-like. No vantage points. No overwatch. Ain't the kind of Task that needs it. Pina'll take point on the approach—handle '*negotiations*' with her usual charm. If she can talk 'em down, great. We watch the scavs clear out, make sure they're gone, then cash in. If not?"

He shrugged. "Then it's you, me, and her cleanin' house. Mouse'll make sure no one escapes the net and take out any stragglers."

I took a second to mull it over, nodding slowly as the whole thing settled in my brain.

It sounded simple enough.

No extra moving parts. No layered objectives.

Just show up, try to be diplomatic, and if that didn't work, stab or shoot until it did.

'*Feels like a 0-Star Task straight off the Operator Board,*' I thought, tilting my head slightly. '*Maybe that's exactly what this job is...?*'

In the game, the Operator Board sorted gigs by a star system, with 0-Star jobs basically being tutorial-level side quests.

Easy creds, minimal risk. It was how the Neon Dragons protagonist started out—pulling random 0-Star gigs to build up rep before anything real opened up.

The whole system was managed by the OPN, and while the ratings were usually accurate, especially when the Task came from a Fixer, there were always sketchy, more private people that would try to smuggle high-risk jobs under low-star tags to save on up-front costs.

But this wasn't the game. This was real.

No guaranteed payout, no save states, no "retry" button if shit went sideways.

Cryo might've picked this job off a board, might've rated it simple—but that didn't mean reality was going to play along.

Still, I nodded again—felt like it was becoming my default setting with this crew—then looked Cryo in the eye and asked the all-important question, "So. When do we start?"

Cryo gave an awkward sort of half-smile, scratching at his jaw as he gestured vaguely toward Mouse. "Well, uh... We're gonna need to wait a bit. Mouse's gotta patch himself up first, y'see. He's got the shard with all the details—he was the one who took on the Task in the first place."

That caught me by surprise, though I kept a straight face.

It made sense when I thought about it—someone as eccentric, and that was putting it kindly, as Mouse probably needed a Face like Cryo to pull together a proper crew. He definitely wasn't the type to inspire a ton of confidence from random Operators on his own.

Cryo's eyes flashed blue for just a second, quickly shifting to yellow as he sent off a message. Almost immediately, the silent shouting match between Pina and Mouse wound down, the two of them abruptly stopping their frantic gesturing and twitching on the other side of the table.

Mouse, still looking half-dead and thoroughly fried, suddenly jerked upright.

His mechanical eyes kept flickering, erratically shifting between different modes and colors like a malfunctioning screen. He began methodically prodding at the sides of his skull, popping open tiny hatches I hadn't even noticed before.

Little wisps of acrid smoke curled out as he fumbled with small, sparking wires inside his head.

"Gotta reroute this damned optic bypass—fucking fried *again*," he muttered to himself, yanking out a thin cable with a quick tug that produced a loud crackle of electricity.

"Ow—shit. Not that one. Damned Spike did a number on the relay loop…"

My stomach twisted slightly, but I just couldn't look away; the morbid fascination far too powerful.

He moved to his left hand next, grabbing each finger one by one, wrenching and jamming them back into their proper sockets with sickening, wet crunches. They twitched and sparked, momentarily locking into unnatural angles before he slammed his palm down onto the table, forcing them into a semblance of proper alignment.

"Capacitor's shot… Servo joint half-melted... Gonna need some fucking replacements again," he growled, seemingly talking himself through the repairs as if narrating his own misery.

His body continued jolting every few seconds, like leftover static was still running rampant through his system.

Clearly annoyed by the constant jolting, Mouse suddenly shoved both hands under his shirt with a grunt. I heard a few sharp, metallic clicks—followed by a loud hiss—and then he yanked his arms back out, holding what looked like a scorched, bloated capacitor the size of a soda can.

The damn thing was still letting off *smoke* and various liquids I didn't really know where to place.

"Fuck me…" I silently muttered under my breath, eyeing the size of the component. '*Where the hell was he even hiding that…?*'

"Huh… Main capacitor's toast, huh?" Mouse muttered to himself, turning the fried cylinder over in his hand like it had personally betrayed him. "Gotta upgrade the surge resistors. Can't have this bad boy blow every time someone throws a halfway decent Spike at me, now can I…?"

From one of the dozens of interior pockets lining his coat, he pulled out another near-identical capacitor—sleek, undamaged, and somehow just… there. He slipped it back under his shirt with practiced ease, and a faint click followed.

"Ahhh… way better."

After a few more agonizing minutes of bone-crunching realignment and weird muttered commentary, Mouse looked more or less put back together—if barely. His mechanical eyes had stopped flickering like busted streetlamps and now hovered in a constant, if jittery, amber glow.

At the very least, he didn't seem like he was about to short out again.

"Right, right…" he rasped, finally turning his attention toward Cryo. "I'll, uh… get that shard info. Gimme a sec…"

His eyes pulsed yellow for a moment, and then Cryo's flashed in response as the transfer went through. Cryo nodded, already scanning the data. "Yeah, that'll do. Let me go through this real quick—see if anythin' changes with the plan."

That was all Mouse needed, apparently.

The second Cryo's attention shifted, Mouse's freakish gaze zeroed back in on me like a cybernetic hawk.

"Say, girl…" he began, voice still hoarse but clearly brimming with excitement, "what *was* that Quick-Hack of yours? I *swear* my ICE caught it—but then it *didn't*. Multi-package, maybe? Layered cascade? What'd it latch onto, huh? My ocular bus? Memory root? It hit real *good*, like, *dangerously* good."

His mouth cracked into a crooked grin.

"Nearly fried my backup systems. I'd give it a solid 9 outta 10, honest. I'd ask for seconds—*maybe* even thirds—but…"

He shot a look over at Cryo, then back at me with a wince so theatrical it was borderline cartoonish. "Pretty sure the boss'd zero me on the spot if I bricked myself again right now. Kinda wants to get this show on the road, yeah?"

Strangely enough, the whole meltdown-death-and-reboot routine had mellowed him out.

Just a bit.

The hyper-twitchy chaos goblin energy had cooled into something more focused.

Still weird, still intense, but I could finally see the netrunner behind the madness—the guy Cryo and Pina actually trusted to handle the deep end of cybercombat.

That last barrage of questions he'd thrown at me? Almost none of them had even sparked a single System-Knowledge ping from my Skills. Just sailed right over my head like he was speaking another damn language.

If this was what a real runner talked about casually, I had a hell of a long way to go.

I sat with that barrage of questions for a second, weighing my options.

‘*I could try bluffing my way through—just walk him through what [Venombite] does, make it sound clean,*’ I thought, then immediately scrapped the idea. ‘*But half the stuff he just asked might as well have been in a different language. I don’t even know what I’d be* ***pretending*** *to explain to answer his questions...*’

My eyes flicked to Cryo for a heartbeat. He was watching Mouse with that same pointed look he’d used before, the kind that said ‘*don’t push it’*.

‘*Alright… Cryo’s got my back, Mouse’s not gonna jump me anytime soon. Maybe I don’t need to explain anything after all…?*’

Maybe it was better to go the other route—the mystery route.

And so I hit him with the only reasonable answer I could conjure, that both covered my complete lack of knowledge on the topic, as well as kept me mysterious enough to potentially warrant keeping around in the future.

“Ahh, see, Mouse… I was told *not* to spoil…”