

Chapter 91 - Expert Advice

“Good news is, the analysis says you’re not, in fact, having some kind of serious brain malfunction,” Mr. Stirling finally announced, pulling the data-link cable from my neck. “There is some indication of netrunning burnout on the chip, however, but since there’s no scarring around it, I’m guessing it wasn’t that bad...?” He trailed off, fishing for details.

“Manageable,” I replied with a shrug, keeping it vague. I wasn’t about to try bluffing him any more than necessary, especially not in my current state.

A beat of awkward silence hung between us before Mr. Stirling sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Alright, fine. Not my business to dig, I guess—wasn’t in the contract for me to play doctor. But I gotta ask... what the fuck was that just now, then? Any ideas? The analysis says you’re fine—actually, better than fine. Like, you’re ridiculously healthy. Your bio-signs are... well, they’re downright *perfect*. Which I don’t see how that’s even possible.”

He leaned back against the coffee table, striking a familiar pose that reminded me of the last time he’d patched me up. There was a definite curiosity in his tone, a kind of probing that I couldn’t let go any further. The last thing I needed was Mr. Stirling digging too deep and stumbling onto things that were best left under wraps.

There was only one way to get him off my back, and it involved playing the one card I knew would work with him: Valeria.

“I can’t talk about that...” I said, meeting his gaze head-on, my expression deliberately conflicted, as if I wanted to spill but couldn’t. I was banking on his previous hesitancy about crossing any lines with Valeria and praying he’d back off.

I was basically pulling the “my mom will kill us both if I say anything” card, and I hoped it was enough to keep his questions at bay.

Our eyes locked for a few tense moments before Mr. Stirling let out a deep, resigned sigh.

‘*That’s a Bingo!*’ I thought, inwardly celebrating as he seemed to finally back off.

“I see,” he muttered with a knowing nod, but I caught the faint grumble under his breath as he mumbled to himself, “*That irritating woman really doesn’t know where to draw the line, huh? Her own daughter... and to this degree...?*”

He shook his head, as if trying to clear whatever thoughts were running through his mind, then turned his attention back to me. “You never mentioned you were a runner. You’ve got a lot of interests for someone your age... You any good at it?”

That question threw me for a loop—I hadn’t expected the conversation to pivot towards netrunning. But hey, anything was better than having to explain why my bio-markers were as pristine as a pre-war relic’s whitelisting privileges. Something even the top-tier corpos were desperately trying to figure out how to achieve for their own survival, with all their longevity projects and anti-decay nonsense.

“Not yet,” I said, keeping it real. I didn’t want to oversell my skills and get roped into some high-stakes Task that required an experienced netrunner when, in reality, I was still fumbling my way through the basics. “But I’m working on it.”

He nodded thoughtfully, and I could practically see the gears turning in his head, recalibrating how he viewed me.

Runners weren’t exactly a dime a dozen; the risk of netrunning burnout was a hard pill to swallow, even in a world full of body mods and life-extending tech. It was one of the very few things that a skilled Ripper’s or Slicer’s scalpels couldn’t fix. As a result, most people, and especially those with something to lose, steered clear of Cyberspace altogether, leaving that particular brand of chaos to the professionals.

But knowing that I was dipping my toes in those waters seemed to shift something in his perception—maybe opening a door, or at least cracking it slightly, to the idea that I could be more than just a courier in the future.

“Listen, Sera,” Mr. Stirling began, his voice shifting back to its usual no-nonsense tone. “I think it’s time we wrap up this whole debt repayment thing. The last two times I sent you out, you either got hurt or tangled up in a situation that could’ve ended with you dead in a ditch somewhere. Now, don’t get me wrong—I don’t really care about what happens to kids like you, but I can’t afford to deal with your mother’s wrath if something goes sideways. You’ve brought me plenty of valuable data, and I can make do with what I’ve got. So let’s just call it even, and you can go back to your life while I go back to not worrying about how to handle that woman’s complaints, alright?”

Well, damn.

I did not see that coming.

I hadn’t expected Mr. Stirling to let me off the hook so soon, but his logic tracked perfectly.

From his perspective, I’d become more of a liability than a reliable asset—and I couldn’t exactly blame him for it either. And if what he said about Valeria’s potential reaction was true, I was putting him in an even tighter spot with my screw-ups. It wasn’t hard to see why he’d want to cut ties sooner rather than later.

But there was one glaring problem with his offer:

‘My Task rewards...! If Mr. Stirling stops giving me Tasks, I won’t be able to complete the major Task for the General Perk Point, and I’d lose out on all that juicy experience too!’

Yeah, sure, thinking about quest rewards in a moment like this might seem a bit self-centred, but they were the only reason I’d agreed to this whole debt repayment mess in the first place—well, that and Valeria’s not-so-gentle push. Now that I was just one more job away from the big payout, there was no way in hell I was letting him pull the plug.

“I can’t agree to that, Mr. Stirling,” I said, making sure my voice was as confident as I could muster, channelling a decent chunk of my Ego into it.

I needed him to see that I wasn't backing down.

He looked a bit thrown by my refusal but stayed quiet, which I took as a good sign.

"My mother," I started, leaning into what I knew could hit home for him, "would absolutely want to know why the repayment stopped early. Considering how this debt came to be in the first place, I doubt she'd just roll over and accept some 'good-faith' explanation. And honestly? I wouldn't exactly blame her. *You* were the one who *forced* this debt onto her—and as a result, me—so I'd rather finish this off properly than leave any loose ends that could bite me again later. Last thing I want is *someone* deciding to dig up this 'final payment' down the line and put me in a tight spot."

My words came out harsher than I'd planned, a little more pointed, but they were the truth.

Mr. Stirling had started this whole circus by calling in a debt that should've been settled over a bottle of wine back in my old life, and now he was trying to strip me of my hard-earned Task rewards?

No way in hell. Not after all the blood, sweat, and near-death scrapes I'd gone through just to get this far. I wasn't about to let Mr. Stirling wipe his hands clean without me getting what I'd earned.

Honestly, I even surprised myself with how confident I was in this conversation.

The old me? I would've folded like a cheap lawn chair in a situation like this.

But now? Now I was holding my ground for maybe the first time ever as Sera and not "Ela", and it felt good—*really* good.

It was probably a mix of my Ego and Edge working overtime, with a side of all the stuff I'd gone through in this new world. Old-world Sera was fading fast, her thoughts and behaviours getting buried under the weight of everything I'd faced here.

Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, I wasn't exactly sure of, but I didn't have time to ponder it right now.

I was too busy making sure I got what I was owed.

Mr. Stirling crossed his arms, leaning back slightly as he considered my words. He didn't look happy, but there was a begrudging acknowledgment in his eyes that I was probably right.

"You do have a point. I *did* cause this whole issue myself, like you said. I can't exactly blame you for hesitating on accepting my "good-faith" solution here..." he admitted, though his tone was still laced with reluctance. "I don't like the level of danger I've been putting you through, Sera. It's not worth the heat it brings if something goes wrong. And this next data collection... it's not going to be easy. Far from it..."

He paused, giving me a look that was all business—calculating, cold, and a bit hesitant. "In fact, it's a lot more involved than the previous ones. Riskier, too. I was considering ending

the debt collection early because, based on this last one's data you just brought me... This next one's *outside* the megabuilding."

My heart sank a little at that.

Leaving the megabuilding wasn't just a step outside my comfort zone—it was like jumping off a cliff into uncharted waters.

I had, of course, known that one day I'd have to leave the safety of Delta's walls, but I'd always imagined I'd be a lot more prepared for it. The outside was a whole different beast, filled with scavs, rogue gangers, and the kind of hazards that made my recent scraps look like playground fights.

I caught myself second-guessing for a split second, my mind racing with the potential dangers: Lack of familiarity, no guarantee of safety like I had in the restricted elevators or on the 43rd floor, and having to contend with whatever hellscape Neo Avalis had to throw at me.

But then the thought of the Major Task rewards flashed through my mind—the experience, the Perk Point... I *really* couldn't afford to let this kind of reward slip through my fingers; not this early on.

Maybe not ever.

But at the same time... if I was already going to take on something this dangerous, I needed to make *sure* it really was worth the risk.

"How about this," I proposed, leaning forward slightly. "You pay me more for the last data collection—a lot more. That way, you'll have an excuse to give Valeria if something *does* happen to go wrong. You can say you gave me a full rundown on the dangers, offered hazard pay, and I simply refused to back off regardless. It gives you a bit more wiggle room for any potential aftermath, and I get compensated for the increased risk."

Mr. Stirling eyed me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "You're really not going to back down, are you?"

"No," I replied firmly, meeting his gaze head-on. "I can't afford that."

Mr. Stirling looked at me intently, clearly mulling over the proposal.

It was obvious he didn't like it—sending me out there wasn't his first choice, or even his last, but I could see the gears turning in his head as he weighed the options.

Finally, he let out a long, resigned sigh, rubbing the bridge of his nose like I'd just handed him the biggest headache of his life.

"Alright, Sera, here's what we'll do: I'll ask around, see if I can get anyone else to handle this job. And before you interrupt," he added, raising a finger to cut off the protest that was halfway out of my mouth, "let me finish. If I can't find anyone else, you'll go and get that shard for me, hazard pay included. We'll ultimately go with your plan as the last-resort, as much as I hate the idea of risking this."

He paused, the room falling into a heavy silence as he seemed to gather his thoughts.

Then, with a nod more to himself than to me, he continued. “These data shards are unexpectedly critical, Sera. I didn’t think much of the intel at first, which is why I even decided to let you go and collect them originally, but with each shard you’ve brought me, things have started to escalate in ways I didn’t foresee and definitely don’t like. With how many of my contacts are tied up in this corpo-chaos brewing in Neo Avalis, I’ve had no choice but to rely on you so far. Finding reliable Operators for corporate espionage work isn’t exactly easy.”

He leaned forward, his tone growing more serious. “Know that this isn’t something I’m doing because I *enjoy* sending you out there. I do it because, right now, you’re the only one available that I trust to get the job done adequately enough. I appreciate the level of honesty and effort you’ve put into this, and I’ll make sure that irritating woman hears about it when we’re all done. You’re helping more than just me here too—these shards are *crucial* for EtherLabs, as it turns out, and getting them to me on time is making a bigger difference than you probably realise. So don’t take it personally when I say that I *genuinely* hope I find someone else to take on this last collection. I mean that.”

He gave me a look that was both grudgingly respectful and tinged with a bit of worry. “You’ve been more of an asset than I expected when you first showed up at my door, Sera. Missteps and all.”

His words hung in the air, a mix of caution and reluctant praise that I wasn’t entirely sure how to respond to.

I felt a strange mix of emotions bubbling up—pride that he unexpectedly saw me as more than just a debt-collection pawn, but also a sharp pang of anxiety knowing that even Mr. Stirling, who didn’t exactly strike me as being the sentimental type, was seriously worried about this next task.

It was weirdly validating, hearing him acknowledge that I wasn’t just some screw-up who had gotten lucky so far. But it also drove home just *how* out of my depth I really was. I didn’t even really know what I had been transporting around, but now I suddenly learned that it had proven to be fairly valuable; maybe even critical intel?

Every task had felt like walking a tightrope over a pit of spikes without really knowing whether the rope could even carry me, but this next one... leaving the megabuilding? It was like someone was setting the damn rope on fire while I was still halfway across!

I wanted to say something snarky to lighten the mood—maybe joke about how I wasn’t going to let a few rookie mistakes keep me from being the best damn courier in Neo Avalis.

But the words stuck in my throat.

Instead, I just nodded, swallowing the nerves that threatened to surface.

“Thanks, Mr. Stirling,” I ultimately managed, keeping my voice steady even though my mind was running a mile a minute. “I’m not gonna lie—this sounds a hell of a lot more intense than

anything I've done so far. But I've made it through this much, right? I'm not planning to drop dead just yet."

I tried to sound more confident than I felt, but I knew he could see through it.

Still, I wasn't going to let the fear win. I'd come too far on this Major Task to back down now, even if the idea of stepping outside the megabuilding's walls made my heart race in a way that had nothing to do with excitement.

Mr. Stirling leaned back, crossing his arms as he studied me, his expression a mix of frustration, respect, and something else—maybe a flicker of reluctant hope. "Just... don't do anything stupid, alright? I need the data, not a report on how the courier I sent got herself killed by a random group of scavs or another. Hazard pay or not, I'd rather not have to deal with the fallout at all... Assuming I'm even going to end up sending you, that is."

"Got it. No stupid moves," I replied, trying to reassure him. But even as I said it, I couldn't help but think about how every single time I'd tried to stick to the plan, things had gone sideways anyway. And that thought—it bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

I shifted in my seat, feeling the nerves starting to creep back in, but this time, it wasn't about the job or the danger. It was about something I'd been wanting to ask him for a while and the whole reason I had even stuck around, accidentally seizing up on his couch earlier.

"Mr. Stirling," I started, choosing my words carefully. "If I end up being the one going out there, I want to make sure it doesn't turn into another... well, another mess, really. Every time I try to plan ahead for one of these collections, *something* goes wrong. Like, *badly* wrong. And I keep ending up in situations where I'm scraping by with a fourth or fifth backup plan—if I even have one left by the time things are wrapping up."

I could feel the tension in my shoulders as I spoke, the frustration of barely surviving the last two times wearing on me more than I'd like to admit. "It's like no matter *how much* I try to prep, no matter how much I go over the plans again and again, nothing ever goes the way I intend. The last two jobs, especially this one... I thought I had things figured out beforehand. I had routes, emergency exits, escape plans. I even knew which elevators I could use in case of a chase. But then I still ran into those Phoenix enforcers, and it all went to shit from there. I barely managed to make it out using, like, plan Z or something coupled with a bunch of improvisation towards the end."

I looked up at him, hoping he wouldn't just brush me off. "You've been doing this kind of work for a lot longer than me. How do you make it work? How do you keep from getting caught up in constant improvisation every time something unexpected happens? How do you properly plan for these kinds of missions, without having to throw out the plans like five minutes into a run?"

Mr. Stirling's expression shifted slightly, his brow furrowing as he listened.

He didn't interrupt, which I took as a good sign—he was at least hearing me out. When I finished, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and let out a thoughtful hum.

“Well, first off, you’re right—planning *is* crucial. Having an idea of where all the players are, where they will be and what your target area looks like is paramount. But here’s the thing: Plans aren’t about predicting *every* little thing that’ll happen. They’re about giving yourself a framework to work within, a baseline to operate from when things go south. And trust me, they *always* go south at some point, no matter how good of a planner you are.”

He paused, probably thinking back on his own experiences. “Your problem isn’t exactly that your plans aren’t good enough, I’d say; it’s that you’re putting too much faith in them staying intact to begin with. You simply can’t account for every variable—random enforcers, nosy corpos, faulty intel. You’ve gotta build in flexibility from the get-go; that “improvisation” you were talking about. More planned contingencies, more dynamic options that depend entirely on what kind of a situation you end up in. And most importantly: You’ve got to be ready to scrap the whole thing the second you spot something you didn’t expect and adjust on the fly.”

He leaned back again, crossing his arms. “Your last plan, for example—you had the right idea with the multiple exit routes and fallback points. But you’ve gotta consider the human element as well. People don’t act the way you expect them to, especially in places like these. Those Phoenix kids? You weren’t expecting them, sure, but they’re the kind of random variables you’ve *got* to plan for—not specifically, of course, but in a broader sense. Learn to recognize the signs early—when things aren’t adding up, when you see faces you didn’t expect. Sometimes it’s about reading the room faster and being willing to abandon the whole play before it even starts to unravel, that differentiates the good planners from the bad ones.”

He looked at me, his gaze firm but not unkind. “And don’t just think about the escape routes. Think about how to make the environment work for you as well. If you do get cornered, can you use the crowd? Can you redirect attention, create chaos? Running to your nearest elevator is a decent strat, all things considered, but not always the only one available—or available at all, when it comes to being outside the megabuilding. You’ve already got good instincts, otherwise you would have died in that second run of yours; you just need to learn to trust them more when your plans start falling apart.”

I took a moment to really let his words sink in, feeling like they’d hit a nerve I hadn’t fully acknowledged before.

A lot of what he said felt like basic stuff—things that should’ve been “common sense”—but in the heat of planning, I’d somehow let them slip.

It wasn’t exactly about not knowing what to do; it was about actually putting that knowledge into action, I realised.

I had already known I needed to stay flexible, to not get too attached to the plan and be ready to toss it all out if the situation demanded it, but knowing and doing were apparently two *very* different beasts.

“Yeah, thanks, Mr. Stirling,” I said, genuinely appreciative. “I’ve been so caught up trying to make everything perfect that I never really left enough room for things to go sideways... not the way I should have, anyway.”

He shot me a knowing smile, the kind that said he'd been exactly where I was before. "No one ever gets it perfect, Sera. But the fact that you're asking these questions means you're on the right track. Plans are just tools, nothing more. They're there to guide you, not to control you. The trick is knowing when to throw the plan out entirely and just embrace the chaos."

I nodded, mulling it over.

It was like a lightbulb moment; a reminder that I didn't need to have every answer lined up.

It wasn't about following a scripted plan—I just needed to know how to improvise better when things *inevitably* went off the rails.

"Got it," I replied, feeling a new resolve to do better next time. "Thanks again, Mr. Stirling."

"Don't worry about it, kid," he replied with a chuckle, heading back toward his usual spot on the cushioned armchair.

Seeing him move back to his chair, I figured it was my cue to leave.

I'd gotten the advice I needed and said what I had to say, so it was time to get back to work—no point in overstaying my welcome. As he started to sit down, I pushed myself up from the couch, wincing slightly as my bruised arm reminded me of its existence.

"Take care of that arm, Sera," Mr. Stirling called out, his tone back to its usual mix of casual concern and business-like detachment. "And remember, don't rush things. You've got potential—just don't go getting yourself killed trying to prove it."

I nodded, offering a quick smile. "I'll keep that in mind. See you around, Mr. Stirling."

With that, I headed toward the door, feeling the weight of the day truly start to settle in.

As I stepped out into the hallway, the door clicking shut behind me, I couldn't help but replay his words in my mind. There was a lot to think about, especially considering his words about the data I had been collecting for him, but there wasn't really anything I could do about it at the time. Whatever that massively important revelation was that he had ended up seeing inside of it, it would remain a mystery for me for quite some time yet, it seemed.

As I made my way down the corridors of the megabuilding, my mind was already jumping ahead to what needed to come next.

First stop: Home.

I needed to rest and regroup, then it'd be time to tackle the final session with Kill Joy inside the SPG-01 shard. I was determined to wrap it up today, giving myself at least a day or so before the meeting with the Operator to try out some new netrunning ideas that had been bouncing around in my head.

But before any of that, what I needed most was a hot shower.

The day had dragged on way too long, and I was sick of feeling the dried blood sticking to my skin and clothes—most of it not even mine. I still had a lot to get through, but a moment of feeling clean and halfway human again was something I wasn't about to pass up.

I could practically hear the shower calling my name, and the thought of hot water washing away the grime and chaos of the day had me picking up the pace.

The day wasn't even close to over yet, not by a long shot, but at least I'd be facing the next round feeling a little less like I'd just been through a meat grinder...