

Chapter 62 - Poetry

The tension and silence in the room was so stifling, I swear I could hear Jade's heartbeat from a dozen metres behind me.

Vega's expression remained impassive, his face a mask of stone as we locked gazes, neither of us willing to back down after my bold declaration.

I was tempted to retract my previous statement, realising in the heat of the moment that I might have pushed way too far, but I knew that doing so would only weaken my position and potentially jeopardise my chances of walking away without harm.

'Why didn't you fucking stop me, System?! You're supposed to help, not let me dive headfirst into disaster like this!' I lamented internally, my frustration shifting from self-blame to blaming anything else I could think of to cope with the crushing weight of Vega's unwavering stare.

It felt like an eternity had passed in this deadlock, with cold sweat trickling down my back from the effort to maintain a facade of composure, when unexpectedly, a voice broke the tense silence—a voice neither Vega nor I anticipated would intervene at that moment.

"I'll repay you," came Jade's voice from behind, her tone resolute. "I'll work off the debt I incurred with my mistakes; Vega has no part in this. It should be me who fixes my own mistakes."

"Jade!" Both Ruby and Sapphira exclaimed in unison, surprise evident in their voices. Yet, they restrained themselves from saying anything further, recognizing that this was not a moment for open disputes and breaking their unison.

I was completely caught off guard by Jade's intervention, so much so that even my usually reliable Ego and Edge couldn't mask my surprise. Fortunately, it seemed Vega was equally taken aback, as I caught him almost leaping from his chair at Jade's words.

"Don't speak out of turn, Jade," he stated sharply, the finality in his voice leaving no room for argument. He then forcibly composed himself, sinking back into his chair with a heavy sigh, and turned his attention back to me. "I must apologise for my operative's impulsive words... She's still new to a lot of this—"

"I accept her proposal," I cut in firmly, regaining my composure and returning to my cold, calculated demeanour after momentarily showing surprise when Jade spoke up.

I leaned back in my chair, re-asserting, "I choose to accept your operative's proposal, Vega. She might be new, and the last time she was involved in one of my operations, she nearly got us both killed... But I can respect the earnest wish to atone for one's own mistakes. And if she ends up being more of a hindrance than a help, then I'm sure you won't mind losing an operative like that."

After all, it seemed like he was very much aware of her lack of expertise. Losing her for a few days, weeks or potentially even months, depending on how long she'd be working with me, was unlikely to be too much of a problem for him—or so I thought.

I could immediately see that Vega was holding himself back—a lot.

His mask of impassivity had shattered, and I could see the muscles in his jaw working furiously as he ground his teeth; he was downright *seething* with anger.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck. What the hell am I doing?! Just drop the whole thing with Jade already, what the fuck are you thinking?! You're going to get yourself killed, you idiot! She's not worth it!' I berated myself internally, my face betraying none of the internal turmoil swirling within.

Surprisingly, Vega's first words, heavy with restraint, were not directed at me. "Sapphira, leave the room. *Now.*"

I didn't dare turn around, fully realising that he had likely ordered her out as a precaution to keep her from attacking me. All I heard were a few seconds of heavy breathing and barely restrained fury, followed by her uncharacteristically heavy footsteps stomping out of the room.

She slammed the door behind her with such force that it echoed throughout the space.

The loud crash of the door felt oddly relieving, as if some of the oppressive tension had exited the room along with Sapphira. However, I quickly realised that this might just be my own wishful thinking, as Vega still appeared to be simmering with barely contained anger and tension.

Vega exhaled a long sigh and redirected his focus to me. "I must once again apologise for my operative's lack of decorum... They're all fairly new to this business, so emotions run a bit hot at times," he said, bowing slightly. It was clear that his apology wasn't entirely sincere—it felt more like a way to save face given the circumstances.

"About my operative's proposal... I'm sure you'd find many of my other operatives more useful to someone with your talents than Jade. Her heart's in the right place, but she has a long way to go to be considered a fully trained operative. I'm sure you understand?"

'Someone with my talents...? What does he even think I am?' I thought, a bit thrown off by his phrasing. *'I barely survived a handful of goons with guns, but he seems to think I'm way more capable than someone like Jade? She at least has actual training in some of this!'*

It was almost as if Vega had built me up into something more than I was in his own mind or something.

I could tell he was trying to steer me away from accepting Jade's proposal, but I had no idea why he seemed *convinced* that I'd be better off with more experienced operatives. Perhaps it was his way of keeping his original plan intact, or maybe he really believed that my skills warranted a different level of assistance.

Either way, I felt like I was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle.

I heard Jade inhale sharply and open her mouth behind me, but a sharp, intense glance from Vega silenced her immediately.

'How the hell did I end up in a scenario that feels like a complete repeat of my dealings with Mr. Stirling and Valeria; just mirrored? Jade, trying hard not to be seen as a burden, eager to contribute to the repayment of an unintended debt incurred... It's eerily familiar, isn't it?' I mused internally.

On one hand, I really wanted to stop complicating my situation further in this discussion, but on the other, I saw a perfect opportunity to keep Jade involved.

I had already technically accepted her offer once; backing out now felt like ceding ground I wasn't ready to relinquish—even if, technically, opting for a more seasoned operative might be the smarter choice.

Bringing a more experienced operative into the fold could be incredibly beneficial for my future data collection tasks, yet it also carried quite significant risks: Notably, the risk of discovery.

Whatever Vega thought he knew about me, it almost assuredly contradicted the reality of the situation.

An experienced operative would likely be able to tell that I was just fumbling around in the dark with just about anything I did; or worse, might even realise there was something off about me—the System's influence was getting harder and harder to hide and I hadn't come up with any coherent-enough excuse quite yet, as to why I could do the things I could.

*'Jade really **is** the best option for me, no matter how I slice it,'* I concluded. *'Not only is she inexperienced enough that my novice-level deceptions might still work on her, but she has also demonstrated a strong sense of personal accountability, considering she mentioned not telling anyone about my [Wall-Runner] Perk. If her words can be trusted, that is...'*

My goals at the moment were straightforward:

1. Get out of this situation alive.
2. Exit unharmed and, if possible, without causing undue harm to others.
3. Try to ensure Jade remained assigned to me, because, frankly, she seemed the least capable of effectively doing that job from all the possible options I had seen—sorry, Jade!

With those things in mind the path forward was clear; albeit very dangerous.

"With all due respect," I began, letting a bit of frost return to my tone, "I believe I have *already* stated that I will accept her proposal, have I not? Unless you're suggesting I go back on my word?"

By now, it was clear enough to me that there was something that Vega thought I was, that kept him from simply "disappearing" me—or so I hoped. With that assumption as the backbone of my current personality, I did my best to play into the role of whatever he believed I was, as best I could.

To say that I was taking a lot of pages out of Valeria's book would likely not come as a surprise; although I would never openly admit that.

"Of course not!" Vega responded surprisingly quickly and intently. "I was merely trying to offer some better options; that's all. If you are satisfied with the operative in question, then Jade will be your liaison and follow your commands until the debt is repaid..."

It was clear he was uncomfortable with the concession; his voice shifted from its usual laid-back, suave tone to a colder, more business-like demeanour.

"As for the finer details of this arrangement, I trust you won't be running my operative ragged or exposing her to any unnecessary dangers?" he added, his tone sharp with an unmistakable edge.

"Naturally. I saved her life; there's no point in wasting it now. I wouldn't ask her to do anything I wouldn't do myself either," I responded quickly, having anticipated this line of questioning.

Unfortunately, my reply seemed to reignite a brief flare of anger in his eyes, prompting me instinctively to shift my hands towards the knife at my back.

As quickly as the anger appeared, however, it dissipated, and he leaned back in his chair, seemingly to signal that he was no threat.

"That's the most I can hope for, then..." he muttered, his voice barely audible, before elevating it back to a normal level. "Let's shift to the pressing matter at hand then, shall we? You've come to cash in the favour I owe you. What can the Clawed Beasts do for someone like you, Ela?"

'Again with that "someone like you"... What does this guy think I am?' I pondered, slightly irked by his phrasing and the implications behind it.

Despite my complete and utter confusion at his choice of words and the surprising deference he showed, which had undoubtedly played a significant role in navigating this convoluted discussion, I was actually prepared for this part of the conversation.

This gave me a slight boost of confidence for my next move.

"I need an introduction to an Operator affiliated with the OPN; preferably someone willing to vouch for me," I stated clearly and confidently. "To be clear: I require an OPN Operator licence for myself. I'm certain the Clawed Beasts have at least one or two Operator contacts they could introduce me to, right?"

Behind me, I heard some shuffling as I spoke these words, but nothing indicated anyone was approaching me.

Vega seemed momentarily stunned, his usually controlled facial expressions—only briefly disrupted during our previous discussion about Jade—now completely marred by utter disbelief.

'Did... Did I just fuck up?' I wondered internally, reevaluating the words I had just spoken.

In Neon Dragons, the only way to get a licence was to be vouched for by an existing Operator and apply, as far as I remembered. But I suddenly realised that, if this world operated differently in terms of acquiring an Operator licence, I might have just exposed how little I actually knew about what I was requesting—something that might disillusion Vega of whatever he thought was going on with me and, subsequently, remove the protection it clearly seemed to provide.

The silence that followed my request felt more oppressive than anything before, despite the previous hostility having mostly subsided. The sheer disbelief and confusion on Vega's face, now fully visible without his usual poker face, sent my anxiety into overdrive.

Unable to stop myself from clarifying, as I felt the crushing weight of potential ridicule hanging over me, I pushed on, "The Clawed Beasts do have an Operator contact capable of fulfilling my requests, yes?"

That question seemed to snap Vega back into his professional mode as his poker face slid back into place, providing me a slight reprieve.

"Ah, naturally. My apologies, I was taken aback by the... simplicity of the request," he explained smoothly. "I can certainly arrange such a meeting for you, though I must clarify that I cannot *guarantee* the Operator will vouch for you independently. They are contacts, not directly affiliated with the Clawed Beasts. I trust that's acceptable?"

His response was more or less what I had anticipated, so I nodded firmly, then stood up with a sense of purpose.

"Then that settles my favour. Once the meeting is arranged, I consider our accounts settled," I declared, feeling a mix of relief and determination. Turning to Jade, who still looked completely taken aback by how the conversation had unfolded, I quickly sent her a request for her contact details through my cerebral interface, then did the same with Vega.

"Since our last unspoken agreement didn't pan out as expected, I'll be clear this time: I will not engage with the Clawed Beasts or Byte Wolves on my own initiative, as long as you ensure your people stay clear of me and mine as well. Please communicate that to your operatives. The *only* exception will be Jade herself, who will act as my liaison in any dealings with the Clawed Beasts until her debt is considered settled. Are we in agreement on this, Vega?"

This time around, I wasn't leaving anything to chance. I wanted a solid, verbal agreement on my terms and conditions.

The revelation that "Aki" had been sent by Vega to spy on me and Mr. Shori had really opened my eyes—I couldn't just assume people would see our relationships the way I did. If I wanted them, especially a faction like this, to behave in a specific way, I'd have to spell it out for them instead of hoping they'd figure it out on their own.

"That seems reasonable..." Vega replied, though his hesitation was evident. He was clearly not thrilled with some aspects of my conditions, but as long as he agreed, his personal

feelings were irrelevant to me—I just wanted to extricate myself from this whole mess as fast as possible.

“May I assume that the contact request is a sign that you’re open to consider requests from our end if the payment is adequate?” he asked cautiously, catching me off guard.

I had sent the contact request as a practical measure, to have a direct line to Vega in case Sapphira decided to pay an unexpected visit or if I encountered issues with other members of the Clawed Beasts or even the Byte Wolves. It was clear by now that Vega wielded significant influence within his organisation; whatever his actual job descriptions entailed.

But now he was implying a more transactional relationship between the two of us, asking about accepting requests and discussing payment...?

‘Seriously... What is this guy’s deal?’ I wondered, perplexed by his angle and what he thought I could possibly offer them in return.

Requests and payment sounded like Tasks, which was exactly what I was after; it was the whole reason I had pursued this course of action in regards to the favour repayment in the first place.

Getting an OPN licence was to gain access to Fixers, to get Tasks.

So, if I could snag some extra work from the Clawed Beasts directly, there was no reason to refuse, as long as I made it clear that I wasn’t joining their gang—I had no interest in being a ganger.

“As an external contractor, of sorts... I would say that your assumptions are correct, as long as we stay on good terms,” I replied, infusing my words with a bit of Valeria’s precision to ensure my position was crystal clear.

That seemed to put Vega at ease; even through his stoic facade, I could see the tension ease from his shoulders.

“Happy to do business with you, Ela,” he said, extending a handshake that I hesitantly accepted—fully aware it might be a trap, but unable to find a polite way to decline without coming off as overly hostile.

“Likewise,” I responded almost instinctively. Sometimes, old habits just kick in.

Fortunately, Vega didn’t seem to have any sinister plans for me today, and he allowed me to leave his office and the building without any further complications.

The moment I stepped out of the Downpour, I sprinted to the nearest alley and violently threw up twice.

‘That was way too fucking stressful, holy fuck!’

I was an absolute mess by now, barely able to stand as the adrenaline that had fueled me through the last hour finally tapered off, leaving me completely drained.

I headed straight to the nearest restricted elevator, desperate for the relative safety of my home floor, replaying the events of the past hour over and over in my head.

'This was absolutely insane, what the fuck were you thinking, Sera?! You're out here playing hard to get with a fucking mafia boss of sorts? What happened to staying safe, to being careful?! All that for a fucking girl that nearly got you killed, just because you're a bit lonely? You're absolutely cooked!'

My mind raced with these thoughts, struggling to process the sheer absurdity of what had just transpired.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I had somehow gotten unfathomably lucky.

If it weren't for Vega's strange perception of me, which I still couldn't quite pin down, I probably wouldn't have walked away from that meeting.

For all I knew, that could have been the end of my story, right there in his office.

'I definitely need to keep him believing whatever he thinks about me, no matter what it takes.' I decided, adding it to the top of my list of priorities, right below not pissing off Valeria...

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PoV: Jade

Watching Ela confidently stride past Sapphira on her way out of the office, Jade held her breath, half-expecting her sister to lash out in a moment of sheer recklessness.

To her relief, however, Sapphira managed to contain her immediate anger, instead choosing to storm back into the office and slam the door behind her with a resounding thud. She then fixed Vega with a glare that could scorch the very earth, a reaction that, while intense, was thankfully less destructive than Jade had feared.

"How could you let that girl just walk all over you like that, Vega?! What the fuck was that?!" Sapphira exploded, her voice a mixture of disbelief and rage. "You just gave up Jade like it was nothing, even after that fucking bitch blatantly said she'd off her if she became useless?! What is wrong with you?! We should have just slit her throat right there and then!"

Vega remained seated behind his desk, his expression unreadable as he absorbed Sapphira's tirade with a calm that only seemed to infuriate her more.

Jade felt torn. She wanted to step in, to explain, to calm the storm, but the words eluded her.

It was evident that Sapphira didn't fully grasp Ela's capabilities or the potential danger she posed; if she had, her approach might not have been so brash. Despite their numbers, taking Ela down wouldn't have been as straightforward as Sapphira thought.

Yes, they might have succeeded if it came to a fight, but the cost would have been high—far too high, particularly given Jade's current condition, which left her more a liability than an asset in any physical confrontation.

“I was left with no choice,” Vega finally spoke up, cutting off Sapphira’s brewing storm before it could fully unleash itself. “Once Jade intervened, my hands were tied. I attempted to steer Ela towards a different option; however, she’s proven to be far more vicious than I initially thought... I hate to admit it, but I definitely underestimated her.”

Jade found herself nodding in agreement with Vega’s admission.

She had known Ela better and for longer than anyone else present, yet the version of Ela that had shown up today was completely unfamiliar. The cold, calculated, and—for lack of a better term—corporate demeanour of her negotiation had blindsided even Vega.

Jade had only wanted to alleviate some of her perceived burden on Vega, given how ruthlessly Ela had highlighted Jade's mistake and demanded compensation.

Yet now, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that she had unwittingly played into Ela's strategy by speaking up. Ela’s immediate acceptance, rejecting the offer of more seasoned operatives without hesitation, clearly indicated she had a specific plan.

‘What does she expect me to do for her? She can’t possibly want revenge for the mess I caused, can she...?’

“Why are you even negotiating with some random girl like that in the first place?! How did you end up owing her a favour?! Since when are the Clawed Beasts so weak that we can’t even intimidate a random girl? Am I losing my mind here?!” Sapphira continued, her voice rising in frustration and disbelief.

Her confusion and anger were beyond evident as she struggled to grasp just how Vega, usually so in control of everything, could have been manoeuvred into such a clearly losing position by someone as initially unassuming as Ela.

Vega let out a heavy sigh and leaned all the way back in his chair, his hands massaging his temples. “I’ve definitely messed up here... I should have briefed Ruby and you before letting you accompany Jade,” he admitted.

Rising from his chair, he walked around the desk and gestured for the three of them to come closer.

“Listen, Sapphira: Ela is not who she seems to be. She’s far more capable than we realised. There’s a good reason I wanted Jade to learn more about her. She’s incredibly difficult to read, even for me. It always seems like she’s completely out of the loop, until suddenly she blindsides you with something you didn’t even realise she was setting up. She’s extremely shrewd...”

Sapphira’s sceptical look made it clear she wasn’t convinced by Vega’s explanation at all, which only prompted a knowing smirk from him—a reaction he seemed to have anticipated.

"I see you don't believe me... Then how about this, Sapphira. A simple test: Retrace her *exact* steps out of this office and the Downpour."

Sapphira looked visibly offended by Vega's suggestion.

This was one of the earliest things they had learned from him: How to track another person on most surfaces. So for him to request her, who had long graduated from these simple exercises to a lot more complicated tasks, to do this, it seemed like a bad joke.

But when she realised he was serious, she huffed in annoyance and stared at the ground before her, stopping dead in her tracks.

It was supposed to be an exceedingly simple task, given the parameters.

The office floor was covered in fluffy carpeting, typically leaving obvious footprints behind—under normal circumstances.

Yet as Jade also turned her gaze to the floor, following Sapphira's more intense scrutiny, she immediately understood what Vega had noticed the moment Ela had exited the room. Ela had employed her inexplicable, traceless method of movement once again; the same one Jade had reported when she had first seen it on the muddy floor of Shori's Noodles.

There was not a single footprint of hers to be found anywhere in the office—neither at the door, nor near the chair she had been sitting in, nor anywhere in between.

It was as if she had never physically entered the office at all.

"What the..." Sapphira muttered, her frustration mounting as she circled the office with increasing urgency. After a thorough but fruitless inspection, she returned to the group, her face a picture of disbelief, and turned to Vega, stammering, "*How...?*"

Jade half-expected a triumphant smirk from Vega, but instead, he responded with a weary smile, "Honestly? I have no idea. There are high-level cybernetics that could theoretically do something like this, but given her age, it's practically impossible she has access to any of those; they'd be far too invasive for her body to handle. And she doesn't appear to be genetically altered—she lacks any features like FelPaws, which would be non-functional with the combat boots she was wearing anyway..."

Vega locked eyes with Sapphira, his voice gaining an edge of intensity, "*This* is why I'm negotiating with this 'random' girl, Sapphira. Because she makes no damn sense. If we can figure out what she's up to and how she manages these feats, we might be sitting on a goldmine. It's far better to keep her close and possibly on our side, than to have her as an adversary, no matter how you look at it."

He continued to ponder aloud, a speculative tone in his voice, "Especially considering her request... I had assumed she was already an Operator, but since she's not registered with the OPN, that theory falls short. She could be a Corporate Agent, perhaps? What else would she need an Operator licence for...?"

The room fell silent, Vega's thoughts hanging heavily in the air.

Jade felt particularly out of her depth, struggling to keep up with the implications of Vega's deductions about Ela's mysterious abilities and motives.

He let out another sigh, adding to what must have been a record number of sighs from him in such a short span of time. His mental fatigue was more than evident, a clear sign of his mental exhaustion from the encounter with Ela.

He continued, "If push comes to shove, we can have Dyke handle her, but let's consider that a last resort. Sapphira, try to keep your hostility in check. It's not helping; least of all Jade, who'll now have to interact with Ela regularly."

Turning his attention to Jade, his expression softened slightly but the seriousness in his voice remained. "I hope you realise the kind of dangerous situation you've just signed yourself up for... I really wish you hadn't done that. I can't protect you like this, Jade. Don't ever do that again. Are we clear?"

With a quick, solemn nod, Jade replied, "Yes, I understand... I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause more trouble. It's my mess, and I didn't think it through. But I promise I'll do my best to prevent anything like this from happening again. Thank you, Vega."

With those words, they spent the next while strategizing.

Vega took the opportunity to bring Ruby and Sapphira up to speed, sharing everything they knew about Ela and discussing how best to proceed with caution. The atmosphere was tense, but it was clear that they all understood they had entered the next step of their plans in regards to Ela, whatever those entailed...