

Chapter 187 - The Fix

Mr. Shori paged slowly through the notebook.

It seemed like he knew *roughly* where the thing he needed was, but wasn't quite sure about the specifics—so a slow, careful search was necessary.

The pages turned in small, deliberate increments as I worked through the ramen with an intensity that probably crossed *some* kind of line, but found I genuinely couldn't bring myself to care—the broth had hit a gap I hadn't registered was there until the first mouthful confirmed it, and now *everything else* was kind of secondary until further notice.

A few minutes went by like that.

"{What are you looking for?}" I finally asked, once I'd surfaced enough out of the bowl to form a coherent sentence.

He turned a page without looking up. "{My notes on what to do when a student was *dumb*.}"

I momentarily paused the chopsticks.

The response to the mild offense my pride assembled lasted maybe three quarters of a second before something else quietly took it apart—a realization, as those were his *personal* notes. Actual paper, actual years on the binding.

You didn't build a document like that from research alone, but built it from *experience*.

Which meant young-Shori had, at some point, done something equally stupid with a Sigil or a channeling attempt, and had then—evidently—been fine afterward.

'He's not just calling me dumb, but his past-self as well...'

And he was clearly fine enough to run a ramen shop and teach the Technique to other people *decades* later. The relief that hit me at that was bigger than it had any right to be.

I let it be and got back to eating.

"{What do the fixes look like?}" I asked, between one bite and the next.

He stopped turning pages and looked up, and the look was the *serious* one.

I swallowed the mouthful I had going, somewhat involuntarily.

"{It depends *entirely* on how bad the damage is,}" he said. "{If it's too bad—if the Network has been significantly disrupted at its very core—the fix...}"

He paused momentarily, as if he had to consider his next words, then simply said, "{It might as well not exist.}"

He held my eyes for a moment, then continued. "{But if it's minor—surface damage, disrupted flow rather than structural—there are several approaches. Multiple options. All of them cost Credits.}"

He turned more toward me.

"{How liquid are you right now?}"

"{Sixteen Credits,}" I said immediately, because there was *genuinely* no way to dress that up.

Mr. Shori closed his eyes.

He let out a long, slow breath through his nose—the full weight of what he thought about that number, delivered without a single additional word.

"{Then let's hope,}" he said, opening the notebook again, "{it is very, very minor damage.}"

*'Hey, I'm the one with no cash here! Don't make it seem like it's a major bummer for **you**, when I'm the one without Credits!'* I couldn't help but think as I, semi-reluctantly, went back to my ramen.

Meanwhile, he went back to the pages.

The kitchen kept doing its thing around us and I tried not to let the thing he'd said about "*the fix might as well not exist*" take up too much space in my head, with mixed results.

Minutes passed. Then another few.

He kept muttering something under his breath—low and fast, not really aimed at anyone.

Then his hand suddenly stopped.

"{Ahh. *There* it is.}"

He read for a moment, then came back over towards me.

On his way, he glanced at the bowl—it was empty.

He raised an eyebrow.

"{More?}"

"{Not right now,}" I said. "{But—can I take some home?}"

Something in his face eased, visibly.

He nodded, already moving. "{Of course.}"

He set the notebook on the counter in front of me—dense Nighon annotations in handwriting that clearly made *complete* sense to its author, if nobody else—then straightened, and his hands came up.

I recognized the shift in his demeanour immediately. Same posture as the first time.

His fingers started moving.

I could tell right away that they were far simpler than the [Anima Razor] Sigils—genuinely, *visibly* so. Fewer strokes, shorter sequences, nothing carrying the compressed intensity of the channeling gestures I'd spent *weeks* trying to work my hands around.

He moved through it slowly, narrating each step as it came, same as when he taught me about [Anima Razor].

"{Entry point here—firm, *not* forced. The first stroke follows the natural line of the wrist; don't redirect it. Then here—this is where people rush. *Don't.*}"

He held a position briefly.

"{Precision is the *point*. The more precise the Sigil, the more precise the effect. Imprecision doesn't only reduce it—it can change it in ways you won't intend. This junction here specifically. Then you come back to this one.}"

He wasn't strained in the slightest.

No tension, no sharpened breath, no cost anywhere I could see—where the [Anima Razor] Sigils had always carried some visible edge of effort even after *decades* of practice, this looked like he was signing his own name.

"{What does it do?}" I asked, paying close attention to his hands still.

"{Nothing,}" he said simply.

I looked up from his hands, meeting his eyes.

"{It's not designed to *do* anything on its own. It's an empty container—a frame. Other Sigils can be wrapped inside it to extend or shape their effect. But empty?}"

He tilted his head slightly. "{It draws a *very* small, *very* precise amount of Anima through a structured channel and releases it without a purpose. Like... a Quick-Hack built entirely of structure and no payload. You know Quick-Hacks, yes?}"

I nodded and it already clicked he'd fully finished the sentence.

He was trying to get me to run Anima—the absolute bare minimum of it—through a channel simple enough that anything still functional would show it, and anything broken would show that too, hopefully without overstressing anything.

A simple diagnostic.

"{You're testing how bad the damage actually is before committing to recommend any fix...}" I muttered, my attention already back on his hands.

He stared briefly at the empty bowl, then back at me.

"{The ramen,}" he said, "{has evidently jolted your brain back into functioning mode. This is good. Welcome back, Ela. Do not let the *girl* reign for too long. It is not good for your health.}"

I sighed and nodded again, saying, "{I will try my best.}"

I meant it, too.

I already had two separate personas—three if I counted the Cyberspace Avatar, which still didn't really have a name yet—I didn't need yet another one. Especially one that managed to break everything and do dumb stuff.

*'No, thank you... **Definitely** don't need that.'*

Mr. Shori ran through the Sigils a few more times at the same deliberate pace, narrating the details he wanted me to specifically notice and remember—the junction point, the entry angle, the exact *quality* of pressure at the wrist.

Then, on the final pass, he actually completed it for the first time.

A small puff appeared above the tip of his finger.

Light and air together, barely a presence—not enough to push a stack of papers, not enough to throw any real illumination on anything except maybe a room that was completely pitch black.

But it *was* there. Visibly, undeniably *there*.

A soft, quiet little thing that had absolutely no business existing above a human fingertip in a ramen kitchen in Neo Avalis, and yet... Definitely Anima.

Just a very, very light application of it.

I watched it dissipate, then looked at him.

"{Why didn't you teach me *this* first?}" I asked. "{You had something *this* simple available the entire time and you started me on [Anima Razor]}"

He looked at me with the patient expression of someone waiting for me to finish the question I'd already answered.

"{Back then,}" he intoned, "{did you need *protection*—or did you need the capability to *fart light*?}"

I opened my mouth.

"{I saw someone in way over her head,}" he continued, simply. "{Which, to be entirely clear, I *still* see.}"

He held up a hand briefly, preempting the response I was building.

"[[Anima Razor] was meant as a one-time emergency for you. A last resort. Something that could keep a person alive in a situation where nothing else could. *That* is what you looked like you needed.}"

He tilted his head slightly. "{Was I wrong?}"

I thought about the foyer. The specific situation of it. The *math* of what had been in front of me and what I'd had available—the very same one I had done back then.

"{...No,}" I quietly muttered.

"{Then show me the Sigils.}"

I shifted on the stool and brought my hands up, trying to replicate the entry point the way he'd shown it—firm, not forced, following the wrist's natural line without redirecting.

Both of my arms *lit* up—but not with any kind of light.

The burn started at my fingers and moved inward simultaneously, hitting my hands, my wrists, crawling up my forearms toward my elbows in the space of about half a second—like a severe allergic reaction across my *entire* upper body, itching and wrong in a way that made my teeth clench.

I reported it immediately, voice admirably level under the circumstances.

Mr. Shori nodded.

"{Keep going,}" he said. "{This is expected. Your Anima Network is transmitting Anima into the Sigils. That it is doing so *at all* is very good news.}"

He paused, then added, with the specific tone of someone delivering something distinctly reassuring, "{The fact that you are not screaming uncontrollably on the floor means it is not as bad as it could have been.}"

I stared at him for a full second.

"{That,}" I said, quietly, "{would have been very nice to know *beforehand*.}"

He said nothing.

"{Did that happen to you?}"

He looked at me, as I looked at him.

Our eyes met and he said nothing.

'*Right,*' I thought, with the mild defeat of someone who had already known the answer before asking. '*Kind of a stupid question. He wouldn't know what it felt like unless it had happened to him or someone he'd watched go through it firsthand. Which, given the notebook, was almost certainly the first or both.*'

I focused back on the Sigils.

The burning got worse as I continued—not the nerve-deep tearing sensation that [Anima Razor] usually opened with, but still *relentless* and spreading, the kind of discomfort that compounded every second I stayed in it. Downright unbearable inside of a minute, in a completely different direction than anything I'd associated with Anima work before.

But the *physical* strain I'd expected wasn't there.

No fatigue pulling at the muscles, no mounting weight in my hands, no sense of my body being asked to do something it *fundamentally* couldn't sustain.

The Sigils were just—*light*.

Simple in a way that [Anima Razor] had never once been, not even after everything I'd put into trying to get the Sigils exactly right and leveling it several times.

Mr. Shori, meanwhile, walked me through each step again, correcting the junction point once when I drifted.

I adjusted, clenched my teeth at the ever-increasing burn and itch, and kept going.

Then, finally, I completed it.

The puff of light appeared above my fingertip—small, quiet and barely there.

The same soft non-presence his had been.

Air and light together for about two seconds before it dissolved back into nothing.

I couldn't have stopped the grin if I'd tried.

It was immediate and I genuinely didn't care, because that was *actual* magic.

I had just done *actual* magic again, in a ramen kitchen, with damaged hands, on the back of a very bad two days, and it had *worked*!

My eyes darted towards Mr. Shori and I was almost certain—*almost*—that the absolute faintest edge of a smile had crossed his face before his expression resettled into its default.

"{Very lucky,}" he delivered the verdict. "{The damage to your Network is about as mild as it could reasonably be, given what you put it through.}"

The relief and the concern arrived at exactly the same time and fought briefly for main priority.

Relief won for about half a second before concern got its footing.

Because—"as mild as it could be"—that phrasing was doing a *lot* of work.

That phrasing implied a *scale*.

'If this is the mildest possible version,' I thought, looking at my still-burning, itching hands and arms, trying my best not to scratch them, *'what the fuck does the bad version actually look like?'*

Mr. Shori consulted the notebook again then, running his finger down a page and quietly muttering to himself.

"{There are several ways,}" he said, after a moment. "{Some better than others. Most cost a significant amount of Credits.}"

He turned a page, scanned it briefly, then looked up. "{*Most*. Not all.}"

"{What's the exception?}" I asked.

"{A Spirit Companion.}"

I straightened on the stool before I'd consciously decided to, the reaction entirely involuntary, and Mr. Shori caught it the same way he caught everything immediately.

The notebook closed.

He looked at me with the *serious* expression once again—the specific one that meant he was about to ask something he genuinely needed an honest answer to.

"{*How*,}" he said, "{do you know about Spirit Companions?}"

"{I had a run-in with someone who had one,}" I answered immediately. "{I got away clean—mostly.}"

The kitchen was quiet for a moment.

Mr. Shori's eyes didn't move from my face, but whatever was happening behind them had turned inward—he was thinking, *properly*.

His hand rested on the closed notebook without gripping it.

I didn't dare interrupt.

'Should I tell him about Valeria...?'

The thought surfaced quietly while I waited.

About where and how the “run-in” had *actually* happened, and what it had actually been—because “a run-in with someone who had one and I got away” was doing an *enormous* amount of compression on what had genuinely occurred.

'Mr. Shori has been nothing but straightforward with me... He's earned more than that, hasn't he?' I thought, but then another part got added on. *'But he'd also never **once** asked about my personal life either...'*

His kitchen, his knives, his Technique, my life, my work, my progress—*that* was the shape of what we were, and it had worked.

I'd never felt the lack of it going further than that.

'And does it actually change anything?' I mused. 'Whether I ran into a Spirit Companion through a random adversary or through someone considerably less random—it doesn't change how I know about Spirit Companions. Doesn't change the damage to my Network. Doesn't change what he was looking at in that notebook and doesn't change what the fix needs to be.'

The relevant information was already on the table, in my mind.

'This is not the same kind of situation as with the crew earlier. This is not actually relevant information...'

So I let it stay there.

Mr. Shori came back to himself after another moment and shook his head slowly.

"{You need to be more careful,}" he said. "{I mean this in the broadest possible sense. The things you are trifling with—the situations you are finding yourself in —}"

He paused, choosing his phrasing with care. "{You are *not* ready for them. Not in general, and *especially* not now, at this stage, in the condition you are currently in.}"

He held up a hand before I could respond.

"{I am not speaking *only* of the Anima Network. You have no augmentations—no Cybernetic, no Bionic, no Genetic. Your understanding of Anima is, despite genuine progress, still... foundational, if we're being generous. A Spirit Companion is *several* layers above where you currently stand.}"

His eyes were focused on me now.

"{Yes—one *would* fix the damage to your Network. Yes—technically for free, no Credits required. But there is no realistic path to acquiring one inside this Megabuilding.}"

I opened my mouth once more, wanting to add that I wasn't against going outside the Megabuilding—that's where I was doing gigs, after all.

But I was interrupted.

"{Or Neo Avalis proper,}" he added, without missing a beat, and I closed it again.

"{There are very few unclaimed ones in the city. None that I personally know of, but I would say that, categorically, they do exist—finding one would be a project in itself, with no guaranteed outcome, however.}"

He set the notebook down flat on the counter. "{Outside the city, the odds improve *considerably*... But I *forbid* it.}"

The words landed with a level of hardness I had never heard from Mr. Shori before and that left *no* room for arguments.

"{Without proper preparation,}" he continued, "{you do *not* go outside Neo Avalis. Not for this. Not for *anything*.}"

He looked at me steadily. "{And I will tell you plainly—if you go outside this city before you are genuinely ready, you *will* not come back. That is not a dramatic statement. That is a *description* of what will happen.}"

He let that sit for a moment, then added: "{I would *also* be *seriously* reconsidering our work arrangement at the stall here, even *if* you managed to return.}"

I nodded. *Repeatedly*.

Because he definitely wasn't being dramatic—I *knew* he wasn't, because I'd done enough wiki reading on the subject to have a fairly clear picture of what outside the city actually looked like, and "dramatic" wasn't anywhere in the description.

If the Scavs and gang politics and corporate maneuvering *inside* Neo Avalis were a particular kind of dangerous, the roaming crews and the *things* that technically qualified as animals in the loosest sense of the word outside it were several layers above that in completely different directions.

The only scenario in which your odds outside were actually better was if you'd genuinely, *catastrophically* burned every option inside—gotten on the actual radar of a major corp, made the kind of enemies inside the city that made outside feel like a reasonable alternative by comparison.

At *that* point you were essentially choosing between flavors of very bad, and at least outside you could theoretically outrun some of what was trying to kill you—*theoretically*.

"{Understood,}" I said, and meant it *entirely*.

Mr. Shori held my gaze for another moment, then nodded once and reopened the notebook.

"{The other options are items. Two of them.}" He scanned the page. "{One is a consumable—injector type. Fast acting, targeted. It addresses the damage directly but the coverage is limited to what it can reach in a single application... Should be enough to fix you, but you will remain sore for a while}"

He turned the page.

"{The other is a machine. Reusable. Slower, but more comprehensive—it works across the *whole* Network rather than a specific site. More thorough by a significant margin..."

"{Also *considerably* more expensive.}"

"{*How* considerably?}"

He simply looked at me.

I remembered my sixteen Credits and did not push further.

"{So. The injector, then... What's that gonna set me back for?}"

Mr. Shori sighed—not the heavy one from earlier, a shorter version, like he'd already seen this coming and had been deciding something in the background.

Our eyes met and he considered for a few seconds, before sighing yet again.

"{I'll get you one,}" he ultimately decided. "{You'll pay me back. You clearly can't afford it right now, but you've been consistent with the work here, so you'll work it off in time. It won't be immediate, but it will happen.}"

The refusal was halfway assembled and moving toward my mouth before I caught it—the instinct that had been running ever since the promise with Misha.

'No more debt... That's what I said.'

But then the *actual* picture of my situation arrived and quietly dismantled the refusal before it cleared my teeth.

My Anima Network was severely damaged—at least severely enough to be debilitating.

It wasn't catastrophically so—not irreparably—but damaged in a way that was currently heavily impeding my progress and day-to-day life.

Which meant the next session with Miss K was going to be a problem.

Which meant the Kenzie and Dojo-crew sparring situation and whatever *those* were going to require of me was going to be a problem.

Which meant Valeria, the next time she looked at me with those eyes that registered *everything*, was going to notice something was wrong, and *that* conversation would be even more of a problem.

I needed this fixed before *any* of those things happened, which meant I needed it fixed *soon*, which meant I didn't have the luxury of "I'll figure it out eventually" sitting as a *real* option on the table.

'And technically,' I thought, with the specific internal tone of someone negotiating with themselves in bad faith and being *fully* aware of it, *'I only told myself no more debt with Misha. Technically. So this is—technically—not breaking any promises...'*

It was a thin read. I was very aware it was a thin read.

I ultimately accepted anyway.

"{Thank you,}" I said. "{I'll pay you back as fast as I can.}"

He waved it off with the particular motion that meant the subject was considered handled.

"{Partly my own fault, really.}" He said, and the admission carried the flat honesty of someone who'd already done the accounting internally and arrived at a number they were willing to own. "{I taught you the Sigils. I *should* have given you a proper understanding of the risks before doing so—what the Network could sustain, what it couldn't, what happens when you push it beyond its current capacity...}"

He shook his head slightly.

"{I had not *genuinely* anticipated you finding yourself in a situation where you would need to apply [Anima Razor] through a full blade, improvised, under combat conditions, within mere weeks of me showing it to you. I had mostly intended it for an unarmed emergency—restraints, bindings. Something precise and small... With the blade things later down the line, when you were more ready.}"

He set the glasses aside, closed the notebook, and slid both back toward the hidden compartment with a movement that had the finality of a chapter closing.

"{But it saved your life,}" he said simply. "{So.}"

He left it there and moved back toward the prep area, picking up where the afternoon's work had left off—broth temperatures, ingredient checks, the quiet rhythm of a kitchen about to shift from maintenance mode into something more active again.

I watched him for a moment.

"{Can I help?}" I asked. "{Work some of it off ahead of time.}"

Mr. Shori made the sound—the low, specific chuckle that wasn't quite a laugh but was warmer than most people's actual laughs—and reached under the counter without looking, producing my work clothes in a single smooth motion and dropping them on the stool beside me with the easy certainty of someone who had pulled them out in advance and left them there, at some point, because he had seen *exactly* this coming from the moment I'd walked through the door.

I stared at the folded stack for a second.

'*Of fucking course,*' I thought with a smile, and went to get changed...