

Chapter 66 - Sensei Knows Best

After waving a flinching and groaning Gabriel off, I plunged into my usual workout routine, spicing it up a bit with some new challenges thanks to the experience mechanics I had been exploring recently. It felt great to be active and pushing my limits again, especially after the marathon netrunning sessions I had endured to boost my netrunning Skills the whole night.

'And there's more of that lined up for today...' I thought, a tad ruefully.

While I relished the learning and the rapid improvement in my netrunning abilities, not to mention numbers going brrr quite hard, I couldn't ignore the toll it had taken on me.

'Feels a bit like I'm reverting to some old, unhealthy habits from my past life,' I reflected as I smoothly rose from a push-up. But I quickly dismissed the thought, chuckling to myself, *'At least now, I'm in better shape, physically.'*

Maybe if I would've done some body-weight exercises, I never would've succumbed to that stroke or whatever it was that had ultimately done me in. *'Not sure if I'd prefer still being in that old world, in my old body, though... Maybe this is for the better?'*

In just a few weeks here, I'd discovered joys I couldn't have imagined in my past life—like forming a business friendship with Misha, essentially an alien lifeform, or learning under the kind and wise Mr. Shori.

These experiences were shaping up to be far more fulfilling than anything I'd known before.

There was definitely a part of me that missed my old friends, however.

The same part that had recoiled at the thought of never seeing Jade again; our relationship, though strange, had been meaningful in its own right; being the first person roughly my age that I had connected with.

Recognizing this pang of loneliness, I made a quiet promise to myself, "I really need to make some genuine friends in this world, or I'm just going to keep letting the wrong kind of people into my life like this. I can't just hope that I somehow end up successfully hard-balling a mafia boss, every time I'm feeling lonely..."

There was one person, around my age, who might just fit the bill for a potential friend as well, although I definitely recognized that I was jumping the gun a bit: Kenzie.

I was actually looking forward to seeing the feisty fox girl again in just two days. Our last sparring session, as painful as it had ended up being, had also been thoroughly invigorating; in more ways than one. The give and take, adjusting to each other's moves and anticipating future ones, had been exhilarating and very enjoyable.

'But next time, I'm keeping both eyes intact... That's for sure.'

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Finishing up my usual early-morning workout routine with a quick shower before heading down towards Mr. Shori's; I quickly went over my goals for the day—my days had become more and more chaotic recently, so I was trying my best to claw back a sense of order by trying to plan things out a bit more ahead of time.

"Do my usual shift, then head back and dive into netrunner-land," I vocalised to keep myself on track. "I really need to finish the shard sooner rather than later, especially if I'm going to gain any meaningful real-life experience before next week..."

The looming deadline to impress a seasoned Operator in just a few days was daunting and stirred a wave of anxiety every time I thought about it. To push those thoughts aside, I focused on reviewing the progress I had made this morning.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for Edge Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

"Fuck me..." slipped out under my breath.

Without the rested experience bonus, my entire morning routine barely made a dent in the lofty goals I had set for myself. Sure, my stats were creeping up, but the actual experience points gained were underwhelming. Especially Body, which had recently hit level 5 and was now *painfully* slow to improve—this morning's entire workout had eked out a mere 200xp.

'At this rate, it'll take almost a full month of this level of exercise to reach Body 6,' I calculated quickly in my head. 'Skipping the Rest Function to squeeze in more netrunning time is definitely slowing down my [Stealth] and Body Attribute gains tremendously... But sacrifices are necessary, I guess. Once I link up with a Fixer and start taking on more Tasks, I'll be raking in way more experience than the Rest Function's bonus xp could ever offer... Assuming, of course, everything goes to plan.'

Stepping out of the shower and heading down to Mr. Shori's in my usual work outfit—this time augmented with three additional throwing knives strapped to my hip on one of the many belts I had liberated from my Operator outfit—I was relieved not to encounter any dubious, intimidating figures just before reaching the stall.

"Good morning, Ela!" came Mr. Shori's friendly, cheerful voice, a welcome contrast to the challenging thoughts swirling in my head.

"Mornin' Mr. Shori," I replied, somewhat distracted as I slipped on the work-apron Mr. Shori had laid out for me. I couldn't help but notice that beside my own apron lay another—Jade's.

*'Looks like Mr. Shori wouldn't mind her sticking around either...Not that he knows anything about the whole mess that has unfolded between us, but I'm sure he's aware of **something** going on. Mr. Shori is clearly a lot more attentive than I originally gave him credit for, after*

all, I mused, arranging the initial broth pots and scooping in the pre-prepared algae Mr. Shori had cut and set aside at some point earlier in the day already.

It seemed like it was shaping up to be just another typical day at the stall, but just as I settled into the routine, life decided to toss a curveball my way. Mr. Shori, unexpectedly, joined me in the back of the stall.

With a puzzled look, I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to explain his unusual presence here. Normally, he'd be bustling around the front, managing customers for hours on end before we took our brief pre-lunch break together.

When Mr. Shori remained silent, even after I stared at him questioningly for a few long seconds, I finally broke the silence.

"Mr. Shori? Is everything alright?" I asked, trying to gauge his mood.

He simply nodded and motioned for me to continue with my tasks, his gaze fixed on me a bit too intently. His scrutiny made me feel uneasy, like I was missing something obvious.

'Is he okay? This isn't like him at all,' I wondered, increasingly anxious.

As I approached the cutting board and grasped one of the knives to begin slicing the algae, Mr. Shori finally spoke, his voice carrying a note of observation. "Ela is good with knife for cooking; but Ela does not know how to use knife like blade," he commented.

I stopped dead in my tracks, keeping the knife hovering just a hair's breadth over the algae.

"I never really had anyone teach me to use a knife; I just picked it up and tried to do my best to mimic what I saw others do," I explained carefully. I wasn't sure where Mr. Shori was going with this, and while I trusted him at this stage, I still didn't want to accidentally reveal more about the System's influence on me than necessary—I had learned my lesson with Miss K and the perpetual stress that whole issue was causing.

Mr. Shori's expression grew serious as he met my gaze squarely.

"I figured. I will teach Ela, if Ela wants," he offered, his tone earnest.

My eyes widened in response, a mixture of surprise and realisation hitting me.

"You want to teach me?" I echoed, almost unable to believe what I was hearing.

Yet yesterday's incident with the man in the alley, in which Mr. Shori had unexpectedly come to my aid, had thoroughly shaken up that view.

The way Mr. Shori had wielded his knives, ready to confront whoever had prevented me from reaching the stall, was unlike anything I had ever witnessed. Despite my proficiency, already at Level 3 in [Knives], the technique Mr. Shori had used left me brimming with questions.

The forms he demonstrated were far removed from any System Knowledge I had acquired; none of the downloads so far had even hinted at something like this before.

"Teach Ela how to wield knife like blade, yes," Mr. Shori re-iterated with a sage nod. "I don't want Ela to be without defence; the man might return someday."

"I... I would be honoured, Mr. Shori! Please, do teach me!" I responded earnestly, my excitement genuine.

This was an opportunity that I absolutely could *not* afford to miss.

Not only was there the potential of a [Mentor Bonus] coming into play, assuming Mr. Shori was as knowledgeable as he seemed, but it might even finally get my dormant [Blades] Skill to start becoming relevant.

Considering that I was maxed out on Skills and already had to discard one, I really needed to start making use of the ones that had simply been laying around, taking up slots, or discard them entirely sometime soon.

With a kind, yet firm nod, Mr. Shori gently moved me aside and took his place at the cutting board. He paused briefly, simply instructing, "Observe," before he picked up the knife I had set down and began to slowly slice through the algae, just as I did every day.

I intently stared at the way he cut the algae, the way he held the knife, the way his muscles moved and just about anything I could think of to observe, but, at the end of the day, I didn't see any difference to what I had been doing before.

I even ended up switching sides multiple times to be closer or further away from the knife that did the cutting, as if the changed perspective could somehow help me figure things out; to no avail.

Mr. Shori simply continued his methodical slicing without further comment, his focus unwavering.

Minutes started to drag on, and my frustration mounted.

'What the fuck am I not seeing here?' I wondered, as I went to pick up a nearby knife and mimic his moves; which felt slightly odd as he gripped the knife slightly differently than I would normally do courtesy of his larger hands, but I was still missing the large lightbulb moment that I felt like Mr. Shori was aiming for.

Finally, after about five minutes of this futile imitation, I had to admit my confusion.

"Mr. Shori... I don't get it," I confessed, my voice laced with frustration and a sense of defeat. "All I see is you cutting algae. I do this every day; I really don't understand what you're trying to show me..."

As soon as I voiced my confusion, Mr. Shori ceased his methodical cutting, giving me a look that carried a profound depth of understanding. He stepped back from the cutting board and, without a word, extended his hand towards me, silently asking for the knife I held.

I handed it to him without hesitation.

The instant he grasped the second knife, *something* shifted noticeably.

Positioning himself once again in front of the cutting board, he resumed his task—this time using both knives at the same time.

His actions were as deliberate as before, but there was a tangible difference in his presence and technique that I hadn't noticed earlier. It wasn't in the grip or the speed; those remained unchanged. Yet, *something* essential had altered the moment he began using both knives.

I strained to discern what had fundamentally shifted, but the subtlety of the change eluded me still.

'Is it the way he's holding the knives...? The way he's applying force to them slightly differently than normal through the way he's gripping them...?' I wondered, as I slowly began to go through every possible option one by one once again.

There seemed to be a detail just beyond my grasp, something crucial I was missing, yet felt similarly on the tip of my tongue.

Without a standard kitchen knife within easy reach and not wanting to break my focus from observing Mr. Shori's precise movements, I instinctively drew my Operator knife.

I hoped that by mimicking his actions again, I might stumble upon the hidden nuance I was so desperately trying to understand.

Minutes ticked by, and I noticed beads of sweat beginning to form on Mr. Shori's forehead.

This was a wake-up moment for me, as I had rarely seen Mr. Shori sweat before; even after a full day's work at the stall. It was clear that *whatever* it was that he was doing was not only subtle but extremely demanding.

'I need to figure this out... quickly!' I thought, sensing he might not sustain this intensity much longer. Driven by this sense of urgency, I set up another cutting board next to his.

I duplicated his setup *exactly*, placing an identical amount of algae before me, and began to mirror his actions precisely, hoping to replicate whatever unique method he was employing.

But as I began, something odd caught my attention—my knife wasn't actually slicing through the algae at all.

Puzzled, I paused, focusing intently on my own board rather than Mr. Shori's.

I replicated his motions with downright frightening exactness, yet my blade merely nudged the algae, barely missing actual cuts by fractions of a millimetre. It was a frustrating, exasperating moment; I was doing everything right, yet somehow, it *wasn't* quite right—I was wasting valuable time that Mr. Shori's endurance might not give.

'I guess I need a bigger knife; my RaZ isn't cutting it here—literally,' I figured as I stepped away and tried to reach for one of the kitchen knives further away, only to stop halfway through my movement; a sudden epiphany coalescing in my mind.

Rushing back to the cutting boards, I leaned in dangerously close to where Mr. Shori continued his methodical slicing.

"No fucking way..." I whispered, as I finally realised what it was that had caused this strange feeling as I watched Mr. Shori cut the algae earlier.

The answer was as simple as it was impossible: *He wasn't.*

Just like with my RaZ, the knives in his hands were barely grazing the algae.

Yet, unlike my attempts, the algae parted seamlessly as if sliced cleanly through.

As Mr. Shori's knives glided over the algae, they continued to "cut" without ever truly making contact—mimicking the effect of vibro-weaponry, though I knew for a fact that these were the same standard knives I had been using for over a week, constantly sharpened with my [Sharpen] Perk.

I knew those knives better than just about anything else in this world and they definitely had no vibro-tech built in; of that, I was 100% certain.

"How...?" I found myself muttering, completely transfixed by Mr. Shori's baffling knife technique that seemed to cut without cutting.

With a contented smile, Mr. Shori ceased his movements, staggering backward a step.

I quickly reached out to steady him.

He chuckled heartily, a sound that filled the space with warmth. "Haha, I have not done this in long time. More exhausting than I remember."

He gratefully sank down onto a nearby crate, one I knew was stocked with algae.

I hurried to hand him a cup of water.

Staying hydrated had been a challenge during my initial days at the stall; I'd almost fainted from neglect on my first day. But Mr. Shori had emphasised its importance, insisting I drink at least a full cup every hour. Since then, I'd always kept a cup of water close by, starting from my second day; the very same cup that I was now handing back to him.

After a few gulps of water and some heavy breaths, Mr. Shori locked eyes with me again, his expression serious but open.

"You see now?" he inquired.

I nodded, somewhat bewildered but starting to grasp the concept.

The idea of wielding a knife like a blade wasn't about the physical knife at all, but more about an invisible force, a technique that Mr. Shori somehow mastered to make the knife act beyond its simple form—the size more akin to a blade than a knife.

Feeling a bit more clued in, yet still confused, I responded cautiously, "I... I think so? But I don't understand *how*, Mr. Shori. It looked like the knife was a vibro-weapon, but... they're just regular knives. How do you do that?"

He nodded slowly, a deep wisdom reflected in his gaze.

"I will teach. Ela needs to know how to wield knife like blade, to be safe," he said with a resolve that was both comforting and daunting. "But don't misunderstand. I would rather Ela be safe, no need for fight. No knife, no blade, no fight. Just safe. But I not stupid; young people sometimes need fight—that is life. I, too, once fought much. Without many fights, no Shori's Noodles. Ela's journey will need fight too, I tink; I help prepare."

Mr. Shori's broken English didn't dampen the gravity of his words or lessen their impact in any way. As he made his heartfelt declaration, I felt a surge of emotions, with tears threatening to spill from my eyes.

He truly was a unique beacon of kindness in this world.

Not only had he extended a helping hand towards me out of pure generosity, the very first time we had met, but he had also offered protection, provided me with a job, taught me culinary skills, and even provided free meals on top of my salary.

His actions yesterday had even shown his willingness to protect me at his own risk, and now, he was ready to teach me some advanced knife-wielding techniques.

Summoning all my composure, I managed only a grateful nod, knowing my voice would fail to convey my gratitude.

"But not now; I need rest," he said with a rueful smile, showing his age. "I not young anymore... I teach after lunch rush; close up stall early today. Ela needs basics, then Ela safe."

I was about to insist he shouldn't go to such lengths for me, especially closing up the stall early seemed excessive for somebody he had only known for about a week, but he was already standing, hand raised to stop me mid-protest.

"I not do this for just Ela. I do this for Shori too. Shori worry otherwise. So we do today, no delay. No delay, no worry. It is good for all," he stated firmly, then added with a mischievous grin I hadn't seen before, "Ela should listen to Sensei. Sensei knows best."

Stunned by his unexpected joviality, I found myself speechless as Mr. Shori returned to the front of the stall, his laughter echoing gently behind him...

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Over the next few hours, I threw myself into the work with gusto, determined to compensate for Mr. Shori's planned early closing by doubling my efforts.

As the broth simmered and the algae were neatly prepped, I even ventured to the front of the stall to interact directly with the customers for the first time.

Initially, I was nervous about handling the orders, fearing I might bungle the task. However, Mr. Shori's silent approval and grateful nods gave me the confidence and peace of mind to slip into a comfortable rhythm.

I swiftly moved from assembling the ramen bowls to garnishing them, ensuring each was perfect before Mr. Shori gave his nod of approval.

My aim was clear: Push as many orders as possible out the window to not let the early closing hit him too hard financially.

To my surprise, the customers responded extremely positively to my presence; many seemed eager to interact with me directly, likely intrigued by the new face behind the counter—novelty was an advertisement in itself, after all.

During this busy spell, Mr. Shori even managed to snag a rare moment of rest, settling into a chair tucked away in a quiet corner of the stall. Seeing him able to relax, even just for a bit, filled me with a sense of accomplishment and relief, further aiding my energised pace.

"So... Are you Yan's daughter, by chance?" one older lady asked me at some point, her voice laced with a hint of conspiracy. "Here to learn the ropes so you can take over when he's ready to hang up his apron? It'd be a real shame to lose this place."

I chuckled, shaking my head as I expertly shuffled ingredients from one dish to another. "Oh, no, I'm not his daughter, though that's a flattering thought! I'm just someone who's had the good fortune of benefiting from Mr. Shori's incredible generosity. I've been working here for about a week now, but mostly out of sight in the back. I'm still getting the hang of dealing directly with customers..."

The lady's expression softened into a warm smile. "Well, I think you're doing quite well for yourself, girl. You should consider helping Yan out front more often like this. It's nice to see that his strange habit of helping strays is actually paying off for once."

Throughout the morning, I engaged in similar exchanges with several of the regulars, even sharing my adopted name, Ela, with a few.

Mr. Shori watched from his vantage point, a pleased smile creeping across his face as he saw my budding confidence in customer interaction. It warmed my heart to see him happy and solidified my resolve to keep stepping up—both for his sake and the stall's.

By now, my gratitude toward Mr. Shori had woven itself so deeply into my daily thoughts that I no longer pondered specific ways to repay him. Instead, I was committed to embodying the values he cherished, hoping to live up to the life lessons he imparted.

That was my plan to show my appreciation for all he had done; too far had I managed to indebt myself to him, that there was no way I could ever fully repay him.

More than once, Mr. Shori stepped up and handed me a glass of water, recognising that I was overworking myself and forgetting to drink regularly, but without any ulterior motives apparent—he did not seem annoyed in the slightest.

When I finally got a minute to take a breather, I had to admit that the day filled with excessive working and interacting with customers had been... surprisingly nice, all things considered.

I'd never been one for customer-facing roles, nor was I particularly social, but doing all this specifically for Mr. Shori added just the right spin to make it feel exceptionally rewarding.

As Mr. Shori began closing up shop while I tidied the back, anticipation bubbled within me.

The mysterious knife technique he'd hinted at was sure to be something special, I could feel it—my inner gamer was thrumming with excitement at the prospect of uncovering a hidden, secret-type of knowledge.

However, before we could dive into any training, Mr. Shori came over with a big bowl of ramen and set it down in front of me, pointing firmly at it and simply stating, "Eat."

I initially wanted to protest, all too eager to start the lesson, but one look at his unwavering expression told me it was futile to argue.

Mr. Shori wouldn't entertain any training until I had finished my meal.

As I began to eat, I realised why he had so insisted.

In my eagerness to maximise the day, working as if I were two people, I had skipped any real breaks for rest, recovery, or even a meal. My typical lunch break had been bypassed in favour of engaging with customers and dishing out more ramen, which had left me downright famished.

'*Sensei knows best,*' I mused to myself with a wry smile, appreciating the algae ramen and faux-meat more than usual. Mr. Shori watched with a satisfied nod at every bite I took, confirming his wisdom in ensuring I was well-nourished before any training.

I wolfed down the ramen faster than usual, driven not only by my intense hunger but also by my eagerness to dive into whatever special training Mr. Shori had planned.

Quickly tidying up and ensuring everything was in its place, I sat before Mr. Shori, my heart pounding with excitement—the gamer in me completely taking over.

"Wielding knife like blade; more than just technique," Mr. Shori began promptly, not one to waste time—very Shori of him, "Wielding knife like blade more about will and believe, than pure technique. Technique important; but will and believe more. Need learn technique first, before Ela can shape will and believe into blade; we start here."

He picked up a nearby kitchen knife and carefully placed it in my hand, meticulously guiding my fingers to the precise positions he desired before instructing me to squeeze and hold the knife just as he had arranged my fingers.

It felt immediately *wrong*.

My [Knives] Skill was in uproar, the muscle memory it provided writhing in discomfort at this unconventional grip, which seemed a complete aberration for both culinary and combat purposes.

Whatever Mr. Shori deemed the correct form for this technique, the knowledge imparted by the System was *vehemently* opposed to it on a fundamental level.

I trusted Mr. Shori more than the System at this point, so I held firm, gripping the knife *exactly* as he had instructed.

“Now, move knife slowly for cut. Slow is better; do not lose grip or cramp,” Mr. Shori instructed as he picked up another knife and demonstrated the motion in front of me.

It looked straightforward, despite the unusual grip, but the moment I mimicked Mr. Shori's movement, the tendons in my hand screamed in agony, nearly making me drop the knife.

“Hurt is good; means Ela is moving correct for technique,” Mr. Shori said, his face serious; no longer wearing the gentle smile I knew him for.

He patiently guided me through the pain as I attempted to complete a single repetition of cutting air. Despite his coaching, my hand continually cramped up until I dropped the knife.

Throughout the ordeal, my [Knives] Skill was practically *screaming* at me to stop; it warned that I was damaging the tendons and joints in my hand and that my actions were far removed from any proper culinary or combat technique.

I was risking serious injury if I continued.

But continue I did, bolstered by Mr. Shori's assurances that I was making progress, pushing through the pain and ignoring the System's incessant warnings.

Then, after what felt like excruciating hours, I experienced a brief tug in my mind—a sensation so subtle I might have missed it had my mind not been frantically seeking any desperate distraction from the pain.

I barely registered the sensation before it was gone, but Mr. Shori had clearly noticed it as his face broke into a broad smile for the first time since we'd started.

“Yes! You felt it, no?! The tug!” he celebrated, taking the knife from my hand—a hand now seemingly locked in the position he had placed it, my fingers unable to move.

“Ela is very good,” he added with a rueful smile. “Took Shori many months to feel tug. Many frustrations, many times thinking ‘I stop’, but could not. Ela feel tug in a single session; Ela very talented. Sensei very proud.”

I couldn't help but flash Mr. Shori a genuine, huge smile at his words.

Hearing that he was proud of my progress felt indescribably uplifting.

By this stage, I saw him not just as a mentor but as something akin to an adoptive father in this world. While Oliver was Sera's biological father, I had barely spent any time with him, rarely interacting outside the few dinners we shared.

I suddenly realised I was tearing up as Mr. Shori handed me a nearby towel, feeling utterly overwhelmed by the surge of emotions. It had been far too long since I'd had a true father figure; my real father from my past life had passed away too early for me to even remember his face.

"I sorry for pain; only way to learn technique," Mr. Shori said ruefully, mistaking my tears as solely pain-induced—probably for the best.

"It's okay. I asked for this. Thank you for teaching me, Mr. Shori," I quickly replied, eager not to let him feel guilty about the ordeal. "Seriously. Thank you."

At that moment, a completely unfamiliar chime from the System caught me off guard—it sounded almost angry, if a disembodied technological entity of downright immeasurable power could even feel such an emotion.

[New {Technique-Skill} unlock detected. Do you want to **discard** [Knives] and [Blades] Skills permanently in favour of [{Anima Razor}]? Doing so will **lock** additional Skills and Perks going forward until [{Anima Razor}] is **discarded**: [Makeshift Blades] Skill, [???] Skill, [Bladed-Polearms] Perk, [???] Perk, [???] Perk, [???] Perk.]

[**Discarding** [Knives] Skill will **remove** [Sharpen] Perk from User. [Sharpen] Perk will be **added** to [{Anima Razor}] Technique-Skill's Perk-Tree and **granted** for free upon Technique-Skills addition to User's Skill list.]

I stared at the message, reading through it several times, but I couldn't make sense of what it meant.

'*What the fuck is this...?!*' I thought to myself, thoroughly bewildered and confused.

As far as I knew, nothing called a Technique-Skill existed in Neon Dragons, nor anything that even resembled it; especially not one that seemed to have such a drastic impact on other Skills and Perks, that went as far as to downright lock choices away indefinitely as long as it was equipped.

I was about 95% certain that this was either something completely new to this world or something far beyond the early to mid game content I was familiar with in Neon Dragons—if it *did* exist in the game, it was undoubtedly a feature that would normally be unlocked *much* later in the game...