

Chapter 157 - Trust

Walking through the 43rd floor felt off in a way I couldn't quite pin down.

I'd run these halls a hundred times, if not more—morning exercise routine, stumbling home bleeding like a stuck pig, getting around Delta in general—but starting from a different apartment threw the whole layout sideways. Everything looked familiar, but it didn't *feel* familiar, like someone had nudged reality half an inch to the left when I wasn't looking.

Which... Technically was just about as true as anything—except we had gone right, instead of left, if we looked at it from the main entrance of Delta.

I kept well clear of the path that led toward the old apartment during my wandering.

I wasn't in the mood to see whatever cratered nightmare the hallway had become after yesterday. The last thing I needed was an emotional flashback to being tortured on the damn living-room carpet.

While my Rest Function took care of all my physical issues, I had no reason to believe it did jackshit for the psychological side of things—and if yesterday hadn't left some nasty scars inside my psyche... Honestly I'd be much more worried about that outcome than if it *did* leave something.

Before leaving the apartment, I'd double-checked the security feed—just to really confirm that the EtherLabs officers Valeria had stationed outside were gone. I wasn't in the mood for any lengthy explanations of potential misunderstandings right now.

'Especially with [Double Life]... If they mistake me for Ela here, I'm absolutely cooked,' I grimaced internally.

No amount of smooth-talking would patch that kind of plot-hole.

I kept myself firmly in "Sera-mode" despite wearing Ela's clothes—voice, stride, posture, focus. The Perk only kicked in when I actually *acted* like Ela, but given my recent track record with accidental disasters, I figured being overly cautious for once wouldn't kill me outright.

Navigating from this side of the floor took longer than usual.

The layout wasn't complicated, but I'd never bothered with this end before, so every turn felt like an unfamiliar detour. Thankfully, Delta had info panels shoved into nearly every intersection, so after a few minutes of following glowing arrows and floor schematics, I found my usual elevator.

On my way down to the 16th floor, I made sure to consciously flip my persona to Ela, letting [Double Life] swallow up the edges of Sera until I was wearing my second skin.

It wasn't quite as easy as flicking a light switch—or my Ego switch, for that matter—unfortunately.

It took real, *deliberate* effort to settle into the right mindset.

As similar as I acted in either identity, there were tiny differences baked into the way I moved and carried myself, stuff the Perk had pointed out when it had first settled into my skull. Aspects that I had to keep up at all times, consciously or subconsciously, for the Perk to identify either of my persona's as being properly assumed.

Aspects such as Ela walking with a bit more confidence than Sera did.

That had been the main, non-verbal distinction, something shaped by necessity on that very first day I'd stepped outside the apartment—weak, unsteady, and doing everything I could to pretend I wasn't. I'd forced myself to walk like I belonged, like I wasn't one unlucky shove away from face-planting and breaking every bone in my body.

Back then it had been pure survival instinct: Look weaker than you already were, and someone would take that as an invitation to test you.

And I'd had zero ability to fend off anyone who tried.

Weeks later now, that fake confidence had hardened into something real, I couldn't deny.

Between the Attribute Upgrades, the drip-feed of combat experience from both real-life events and the Arkion Dojo's intense sessions, as well as the unnatural poise that [Elemental Balance] wrapped around every single movement, Ela's steps had become sure and grounded in a way that Sera's never were.

I leaned into that posture now, straightened my spine a hair more than usual, and let the rhythm of my gait settle into something fluid again.

*'And gods, my posture is better than it's ever been in **either** life,'* I thought with a faint smirk, straightening even further until my spine felt like a steel rod wrapped in silk.

By the time the elevator doors slid open onto the 16th floor, Ela was fully in the driver's seat, and Sera was tucked neatly out of sight where she belonged for excursions like this.

It didn't take long for me to slowly find my way to Mr. Shori's place.

The mid-day bustle on the thoroughfare washed over me like a much-needed reset button, steadying my nerves more than I wanted to admit. Something about being surrounded by normal people—or about as normal as Neo Avalis and Delta had to offer—doing normal things grounded me in a way nothing else likely could have.

The shop was packed—as always around this time—lines curling in on themselves while the old man behind the counter conjured bowl after bowl of ramen like some grease-stained wizard. He bounced between languages mid-sentence without even blinking, tossing out jokes and comments, while keeping track of every shouted order thrown his way like it was nothing.

‘Always a marvel to watch the master at work,’ I thought with a smile as I slid through the crowd. *‘Would be awesome if I could be even half as good at anything as he is at this whole ramen thing... Maybe one day.’*

I slipped into the back and found my usual apron and work clothes waiting in their spot.

For a second I wondered if he somehow *knew* I’d come in today, or if he just laid them out every morning on the off chance I *did* wander in.

Either way, I threw them on quickly.

Not a minute later, I heard him raise his voice over the crowd.

“I check kitchen, will back in five minutes, yes? Not leave line. Food for all is no problem!”

A chorus of “yes chef!” and “okay boss!” in half a dozen languages, coupled with a handful of dramatic groans rippled through the line.

Then his head popped through the curtain, eyes scanning—until they landed on me.

They went huge.

He practically *charged* me.

I jerked back on instinct, startled, but he wrapped me up in a tight hug that smelled of frying oil, cooked algae, broth, and soy—like comfort and deliciousness incarnate.

I froze completely, unsure where to put my hands or what was even going on.

“Ehh... M—Mr. Shori...?” I managed to press out.

“Ela, you fine, yes?” he asked immediately, pulling back just enough to hold me at arm’s length. His sharp eyes swept me up and down, checking for any and all signs of distress and injuries like he had a scan-tool built into his retinas.

Before I could conjure up any kind of response, he already slipped into Japanese, the way he always did when English failed him:

“{I received your mother’s message yesterday and have been worried what might have led to it being sent. Did the Clawed Beasts make trouble for you? I remember you and the Gem—girls with Jade having a scuffle that one time. Or was it the damn Red Snakes...? Did they finally decide to get revenge on me selling them out to the Clawed Beasts, by going after you?}”

There was a distinct thread of anger woven through his last words, sharp enough that I immediately lifted both hands in a placating gesture.

“No, no! It’s fine, Mr. Shori! *Really*,” I rushed out. “It wasn’t because of them... And, uh—whether I’m okay is a whole other question. Physically, I’m fine now, but it’s been... a really rough few days. Let’s put it like that.”

I tried a crooked smile to soften it, but it barely made a dent.

Instead of loosening his grip, the old man hauled me right back into another hug, squeezing tight enough that I briefly wondered if the System needed to hand out rib-reinforcement perks.

“{I am relieved to hear that, Ela... Truly. I was worried you had not sent the message yourself—that something had happened and you were grievously injured enough to require somebody else to inform me or something of the sort. But seeing you now... You look healthy. If you need to talk about what happened, I will listen—after the mid-day rush, if possible. I can close the shop now though, if you need, of course.}”

The last line dropped like a weight—an offer so unexpected and earnest it almost hurt.

But there was no universe where I’d let him shut down his entire livelihood, even if for a day, just because I’d had a bit of a day to work through. Not to mention being so overwhelmed by the old man’s outpouring of genuine concern and support, that I doubted I could’ve gotten any real words out about what had happened anyway.

A lump built in my throat and I had to clear it before I could manage a small, shaky, “After is fine... Thank you, Mr. Shori.”

It was all I could get out before my voice threatened to crack clean in half.

Mr. Shori held on for a few more seconds—just long enough for my brain to finish melting into a puddle—before he finally stepped back, giving me one last once-over. Whatever he saw must’ve satisfied him, because he gave a firm nod, wiped his hands on his apron, and snapped straight back into chef-mode like someone had flipped a switch.

“Ela,” he said, already pivoting back toward the divider in the centre of the kitchen with that determined shuffle of his, “Need two more broth pots before rush end, yes? And algae-noodle—three kilo. Also knives not good anymore. You sharpen?”

He rattled it off like a shopping list he’d memorized ten years ago.

I couldn’t help smiling—big, genuine, and stupidly relieved.

This was *normal*. This was *safe*.

These were tasks I understood and could *actually* succeed at without risking death or getting tortured or cut up by mega-corp goons.

Just honest work with the kindest old man in the whole damn world.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” I said, nodding with more enthusiasm than was probably necessary.

“Good! Talk later!” he barked, already half vanishing through the divider.

A wave of cheers and shouted greetings erupted the second he stepped back behind the counter, like his presence powered the whole place.

The old man answered a half-dozen customers at once, straight back to flinging noodles with one hand and bowls with the other like he hadn't just taken an emotional break.

Following his example, I slipped into kitchen-mode proper, grabbed the sharpening stone, and pulled the first of over a dozen knives from its magnetic strip.

The familiar weight settled into my hand like it belonged there.

Just a bit of kitchen work.

No corpo-war horrors.

No Sprites rewriting my body.

No Valeria staring me down like I was a particularly chatty lab sample.

Just me, a whetstone, a stack of blades that needed attention and a few pots of broths and algae to cook.

Honestly? This was *exactly* the kind of stuff I needed right now...

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A couple hours later, Mr. Shori started closing down shop for the early afternoon, same as always, giving himself that tiny quiet window to prep for the evening rush.

This time, though, instead of wishing me goodbyes for the day, if I had other plans, shooing me toward the sink or handing me another crate to break down, he dragged out two surprisingly comfortable folding chairs from behind the counter.

He carried them into the back, set one down beside a cleared prep table, then placed a steaming bowl of his special ramen right in front of it.

The gesture alone was enough to make my stomach growl like a feral beast.

I didn't need convincing.

I was drenched, hair plastered to my forehead, shirt sticking to my back—hours in a steamy kitchen tended to do that—and the sight of actual food felt like a blessing from the heavens.

I dropped into the chair, downed half a glass of ice-cold water in gulps large enough that made my throat sting painfully enough to put tears in my eyes, and dug hastily into the ramen.

The first few bites disappeared so fast I barely tasted them, but after the initial frenzy, something warm and quiet settled over me.

A weird peace I hadn't felt in... I didn't even know how long—too long.

'A good day's work with a good boss, amazing food, cold water... That's the life,' I thought, letting out a long, wistful sigh as the slightly tangy broth hit my soul in all the right places.

While I ate, Mr. Shori slipped back into his pre-rush rituals—chopping vegetables, checking stocks, fussing over broth temperatures. Time never seemed to stop for him; he simply moved with it, grumbling at it on occasion.

Fifteen minutes later, with my bowl empty and my body significantly less corpse-like, he finally sat down beside me.

He angled the chair just enough to face me directly.

“You full?” he asked.

I nodded, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand like a savage.

He drew in a slow, deliberate breath. His eyes sharpened.

Then, in that low, steady Japanese he used when English didn’t cut it, he asked, “{What, exactly, have you done to yourself, child?}”

I blinked at him several times.

My brain stalled like someone had yanked out the power cord.

It took multiple seconds for the words—and their meaning—to actually register.

“W...what?” I managed, voice cracking under the surprise.

He didn’t soften. Not even a fraction.

He repeated himself, slower this time, “{What, *exactly*, have you done to yourself, Ela? I have watched you work for weeks now—watched you climb from the emaciated state you walked in with to something stronger, more whole, every day. I did not question it. I let you keep your secrets, just as you do not pry into mine. I respect this. I appreciate it.}”

I heard the *but* coming like a freight train.

“{*But* I cannot sit quietly when a girl like you disappears, when I get a message from someone I do not know claiming to be your mother, saying you are ‘out’—and then you return like... *this*.}”

He gestured at my entire damned existence with both hands.

“{Your first recovery was miraculous, yes—possible, with effort and the right food. But *this*—this *refinement*, this *precision* in your movements—this is years beyond where you should be. *Years*, Ela. So I must ask you plainly: What happened to you? Are you in danger? Did that woman give you experimental drugs? Is that why you were out and how you made this leap? This should not be possible.}”

His voice didn’t waver in the slightest. His eyes didn’t move.

He wasn’t accusing me.

He was worried. *Deeply* worried.

For a moment, everything inside me just... folded inward.

Of course he'd notice.

He was the only person besides Miss K who I really should have expected this from.

He had seen me move day in, day out, for *weeks*.

Saw me go from a completely emaciated husk of a body to a fairly well-defined girl that could hold her own in most standard situations in record time.

He knew my baseline better than I did, if I had to guess.

And unlike Miss K, who openly lived and breathed combat, Mr. Shori hid his sharpness under that friendly ramen-shop exterior.

But it was still *always* there—buried in the way his eyes tracked everything, in how fast he could pivot between tasks, in how he spoke and acted when things got even remotely serious.

There was an old warrior beneath the apron; I would've bet my life on it without a second thought.

So whatever Mr. Shori really was behind the apron and the smile, he *definitely* wasn't some random street chef who couldn't tell when someone suddenly moved like they'd conveniently skipped a couple years of intense levels of training.

'From his perspective, this must all look utterly insane...' I realized with no hint of doubt.

For a moment—like half a heartbeat—I considered telling him *everything*.

The System. The reincarnation. The fact that this entire world had once been nothing more than a story to the person whose memories I carried; to the person I had once been.

But the thought lodged inside my brain like a fish bone in a throat.

Because I didn't know how he'd react.

Because I didn't want this—*him*—to change.

Because I didn't want to risk losing the *one place* in this city that still felt thoroughly uncomplicated and safe to me.

So I made excuses in my head—*wrong place, wrong time, too much baggage, too dangerous, I'll do it when I know how to word it all*—but the truth was simpler:

I chickened out.

So I did the only thing that I could trust myself to fall back on, every single time—like an addict reaching for a hit the second it's offered.

I lied.

Partially, as there was a lot of truth in what I was saying, but it was still a lie.

Even [Deception] recognized it as such.

I took a breath, met his eyes, and said, "It's... related to Anima."

His expression didn't shift, not even a millimeter.

"I don't actually know all the details," I continued, keeping my tone carefully controlled. "*Something* happened. I don't really understand it, but Valeria—my mother—does. Or at least, she's trying to. She's the one looking into it. She has the resources for that sort of thing."

Not a twitch from the old man.

Just that same unreadable calm, like he was carved from stone.

"I just... woke up different," I finished quietly. "Had a lot of muscle pains at the start of the day, but working here for a few hours loosened everything up again. I feel completely fine now. And my mother..."

I hesitated for a brief moment, wondering how deep I should really go with this.

"She's a *lot* more knowledgeable than anyone else I know when it comes to Anima. She said Sprites had... done *something* to my body. Some kind of corrective work. But they're finished, and she checked—there's no residual danger. Whatever happened, it's over."

Mr. Shori stayed quiet for a long moment—long enough that the silence started pressing into my ribs, making me painfully aware of every tiny shift in his expression.

He wasn't glaring, wasn't angry... just *thinking*.

Really thinking.

When he finally spoke, it was slow and deliberate, the way he got when he was lining his thoughts up like ingredients before a cut.

"{This Anima... That's the same one as in the technique I taught you? The Razor?}"

"Yes," I said immediately.

He hummed—low and gravelly, the kind of sound that carried a lifetime in it—and his brows pulled tight.

Whatever mental math he was doing looked like it hurt.

“{I wish I knew more of that whole side now...}” he admitted, almost grudgingly. “{Seems you’ve already walked past me on that path. I never cared much for how Anima Razor functioned or what else there might be in that same side of the world... I simply used it when I was younger—a different line of work back then.}”

He tossed that last part out like it was nothing, but the weight of it still hit the air between us.

A blatant invitation to ask.

I didn’t flinch.

That was our relationship: He didn’t dig into my shadows, and I didn’t dig into his.

He noticed. His eyes softened the barest amount.

“{I trust your judgement, Ela. But... such a jump in physical conditioning? No chance it comes without dangers. Body, your brain... maybe even your very spirit. When something changes so fast in such a large way—it *always* takes something with it.}”

I swallowed, then nodded with honest sincerity. “I know. I’ve been trying to be careful. Or... as careful as I’m allowed to be.”

That earned me a raised eyebrow—more eloquent than most people’s entire vocabularies.

I waved a hand vaguely, trying not to look too haunted. “My life is... kinda stressful. In general.”

He looked like he wanted to ask. *Really* wanted to.

But after a beat, he let it go, giving one firm nod instead, as if recognizing a boundary and accepting it.

Finally, he reached out and rested a warm, calloused hand on my shoulder.

“{If you need anything, you come to me. Alright? *Anything*. I do not know much of Anima except for the Razor and a few scraps here and there... but everything else? I can help. I will not let you be alone, if you don’t want to be, Ela.}”

Something unwound inside my chest at that—tightness I hadn’t even realized had been there, the moment the conversation had started.

I let out a quiet breath and bowed my head a little.

“Thank you... really. That means a lot.”

The conversation ultimately wound down on that note, the tension finally bleeding out of the air.

After a short while, Mr. Shori eased himself back onto his feet with a quiet grunt and returned to his prep work—washing, chopping, humming under his breath as he always did; it was calming beyond words.

I lingered for a moment, watching the way he slipped effortlessly back into the rhythm of running his little empire, and then pushed myself up as well.

'Time to get a move on.'

I still had an entire second half of my day ahead of me—and, unfortunately, another conversation waiting that was probably going to be even harder than this one.

This had been a good test run, all things considered.

It told me more about myself than I honestly liked to admit.

There were knots in my head I wasn't ready to pick apart, instincts that curled protectively around the truth like a feral animal.

If I couldn't step past that wall with *him*, of all people... then yeah.

Trust wasn't something I was anywhere close to handing out in full. Not yet.

Maybe not for a long while.

Still... the Anima explanation had held.

It was solid enough for Valeria, solid enough for Mr. Shori, and it would be solid enough for Miss K too, if she pressed. So at least I had a consistent story now, even if it made my stomach twist to lean so heavily on half-truths and, frankly, straight up lies.

What I'd tell *them*, though... that was another beast entirely.

I threw off my work clothes and put them away, slung over my own Ela clothes again, and made my way out of the shop, giving Mr. Shori a quick wave when he glanced back with that fond, gruff nod of his.

Then I slipped into the flow of the thoroughfare and headed toward the elevators.

I pulled up my messages as I walked.

Jade was already on her way to Misha's Emporium, just as I had requested earlier today.

Great.

Two people I owed answers to—answers I still hadn't figured out how to actually give. If I delayed any longer, I'd risk irritating *both* of them, and that was a terrible idea on every conceivable level.

I stepped into the elevator to the 31st floor, the doors sliding shut with a soft hiss, and leaned back against the wall, exhaling slowly.

'Alright, Sera. Round two. Figure out what you actually want to share and think about your words. Don't screw this up...'