

Chapter 149 - Long-Awaited Talks II

I froze for half a moment, caught off guard by the question.

That wasn't where I'd expected her to start—*at all*.

But, the longer I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Of course she'd open with Anima. Everything she'd seen last night—everything I'd done—would likely look like some kind of Anima-fueled lunacy to anyone watching, even to someone who actually knew what they were looking at.

Valeria would never leave a variable like that unaccounted for.

She needed to know just how deep I was into this—and how the hell I'd managed to pull half that performance out of my ass.

And, honestly, she wasn't wrong to ask, in hindsight. Most of what the System seemed to run on was high-level Anima constructs anyway, at least from what I'd pieced together so far.

[Negotiation] chimed in at the back of my mind, suggesting this might not even be about Anima specifically. This could just be framing—an easy opener designed to get me talking, get me comfortable, make it easier for her to slide the sharper questions in later.

The Skill didn't exactly give me much confidence on that front, though.

Valeria was way too good at this game to read cleanly.

So that left me with the actual problem: How the hell was I going to answer her?

Playing dumb wasn't an option.

Pretending I didn't know what Anima was would just back me into a corner where I'd either have to lie outright, which Valeria would easily be able to pick apart, considering she was clearly a master at it herself, or spill the beans on the System—both of which were losing plays.

And while I was a lot more confident now that Valeria wasn't going to strap me to a table and dissect me for research purposes—my opinion had... *shifted* on that whole deal, after last night—I still wasn't sure what she'd do if EtherLabs came knocking.

Or worse, what they'd do with the information if she were ever forced to report it.

So admitting to knowing about Anima was the *only* move. That much was obvious.

The question became *who* I was willing to throw under the bus.

It wasn't like there was just one person who'd taught me everything.

Mr. Shori had been the first, flashing the [Anima Razor] technique that unlocked the Attribute for me in the first place.

But it hadn't been until Kill Joy's [Manifestation] classes that I'd started to get a real handle on what Anima actually was and how to use it.

And then there was Miss K.

Miss K, who had not only agreed to keep my little secret but actively encouraged me to keep practicing; even provided direct examples and practice instructions. Who had gone so far as to hint that Anima was going to be integrated into the Dojo's general curriculum anyway.

So the real question was: Who the hell did I want to "blame" for my knowledge, not even sure where Valeria stood on the whole topic of Anima in the first place?

'There's no way I can rat out Mr. Shori...' was the first thing that hit me, hard and fast.

He'd done too much for me, and out of everyone I knew, he was the most vulnerable to a corp like EtherLabs. If they got even a whiff that he was dabbling in things they might consider... valuable? They'd scoop him up in seconds and there'd be nothing he could do against that.

That was not happening on my watch.

Kill Joy, on the other hand, was easy pickings.

I had no real tie to him—just some conversations with his digital alter-ego in the SPG-01 shard—and if anyone in this world was completely untouchable by EtherLabs, it was him.

They could flex all they wanted, but they weren't ever going to get their claws on the de-facto father of Cyberspace and all things Netrunning.

He was utterly untouchable by anyone but maybe the VeilGuard or MaxTech.

Still, my [Negotiation] didn't buy it.

'She's not going to swallow a line about me just magically figuring this out from the SPG-01 shard, is she...?'

No. It didn't sound realistic at all.

My [Deception] chimed in too, backing that up with a ping that made my stomach twist.

If I wanted this to land, it needed more narrative weight. Something closer to home.

And that only left Miss K.

I hated even thinking about it.

She'd been nothing but straightforward with me, gone out of her way to help me, even committed to backing me up when I told her about my weird knowledge.

The absolute last thing I wanted was to sour that.

But the truth was, she'd never once asked me to keep my end of things secret.

Maybe she knew this kind of situation could come up. Maybe she was already prepared to handle it. If the Dojo really did weave Anima into the higher-level curriculum, then surely it wasn't as strange or taboo as I was making it out to be in my head... *right?*

It wasn't exactly a bulletproof argument, but it was enough of a crutch to make me feel like I wasn't betraying her outright. A way to lie to myself about the fact that I was potentially throwing someone honest and decent under the bus.

But Valeria was waiting, and one thing was for certain: I wasn't handing her Mr. Shori.

And both [Negotiation] and [Deception] agreed for once—if I wanted her to buy this, I'd have to mention them both.

Not one or the other. *Both.*

Which was maybe the first time in history my two main social Skills had ever been in full agreement. And that, honestly, was terrifying in its own way.

I finally forced myself to speak, the words dragging out of me after what felt like an eternity of silence. I worried I'd taken too long to answer—long enough to raise suspicion—but if Valeria noticed, she wasn't showing it.

Her face was unreadable, as always.

"I first came across the concept through the SPG-01 shard," I began carefully, trying to keep my tone measured. "Specifically during the manifestation module. Something about the way the shard presented it had struck me as... *odd*. Like there were pieces missing from the puzzle. That led me to start drawing parallels between manifestation and real-world quick-hacks.

"Obviously, Cyberspace hacks can anchor themselves to code, but here in the physical world... there's no such base layer. That suggested there had to be *something else* at play if the same principles were to function. Some kind of underlying force or energy that I was missing. That's when it clicked for me—there *had* to be something more. I didn't have a name for it at the time, but... that was Anima."

I paused, just for a breath, then pressed on, forcing myself to keep eye contact with her, no matter how much my stomach turned. "Later, at the Arkion Dojo, Miss K noticed that I was struggling with some of the side effects of that early exposure. She recognized the signs before I even understood what they meant. She identified it for me—Anima. From there, she's been providing guidance. Showed me how to control and mask Anima Sight, so I wouldn't give myself away but still be able to recognize Anima when I needed to. She's also been giving me structured lessons, slow introductions on how to manage and manipulate it without drawing too much attention."

I let [Deception] take the wheel, sculpting my words into something smooth, palatable, even if half of it was stitched together out of convenient half-truths. “She agreed to keep it between us. At my request. I didn’t want this knowledge spreading in ways I couldn’t control. And I... trusted her to respect that. And as far as I’m aware, she has.”

I leaned back slightly, still holding her gaze.

Every word had been deliberately wrapped in that semi-corporate veneer I’d been cultivating around her. Just enough polish to look like I was trying to meet her on her level, without overreaching and turning into a mirror or a full-on caricature of her own manner of speech.

“As for how long I have been aware of Anima... I would say around two to three weeks, but I can’t exactly be sure when I first had the thought that it might exist.”

Valeria stayed quiet for several long, measured moments after my answer, her gaze locked on me like she was running some internal calculus.

When she finally spoke, her voice was as calm as ever.

“I must admit, Seraphine,” she said, leaning ever so slightly back in her chair, “I am surprised at *how much* you have evidently absorbed in the short time since you awoke from your coma.”

Her words sent a pulse of unease through me.

‘Since I awoke...’

The implications weren’t subtle, and I could feel every muscle in my body wanting to tighten like a coiled spring. I shut that impulse down hard, locking [Elemental Balance] over myself like an iron shell.

If my muscles couldn’t move, they couldn’t betray me either.

Valeria tilted her head ever so slightly, as though considering some thought that only she could see. “You have changed. Markedly so. The difference between you before the incident and now is...” She paused, searching for the right word, then simply shook her head. “Well, it is difficult to overstate. Perhaps it is a natural result of being confronted with mortality at such a young age. But even so, it almost seems as though that confrontation’s consequences were never meant for you in the first place...”

Her steel-gray eyes found mine again, cutting through the distance like a blade. “Tell me, Seraphine—how is it that you have learned so much about Anima in such a short window of time? Even with Miss Kanis’ undoubtedly excellent tutelage, your aptitude seems far beyond that of a typical practitioner.”

I swallowed hard, forcing my voice to stay level.

“I... I don’t know,” I said simply, and for once it was completely true. “I don’t even know what a *practitioner* is even supposed to *be*, really. Miss K has only been teaching me the basics, showing me how to see and hide Anima Sight and little else. I believe she mentioned

practitioners once, but never elaborated on it. Last night... I just acted. Instinct, I guess...? None of it was something Miss K taught me or prepared me for."

I let my [Deception] handle the messier edges of the statement, weaving just enough stammered honesty through the words to make it sound like I was struggling to put it into terms even I understood.

Not a polished lie, but something closer to raw truth and utter confusion.

Valeria's eyes stayed on me, the kind of look that made me feel like she was dissecting me down to the bones.

Another long, measured moment passed before she finally spoke.

"The torch," she said, each word deliberate. "How were you able to have it at hand? I have been around my fair share of sleight-of-hand illusions, Seraphine, and that was *not* one of them."

She didn't blink as she went on. "I saw the Anima. It was not subtle—it was a rather large amount for somebody new to it all, drawn and focused in an instant. I watched it coalesce, take form, and simply *become* the tool you were holding after. That is not something one does by accident. Do you have any explanation for that, Seraphine?"

Her voice carried no accusation, but the meaning behind it was undeniable.

She wanted an answer, *not* speculation—something concrete she could file away and act on.

I had already known *this one* was going to bite me in the ass the most. Out of everything that had gone down last night, this was the one thing I had zero hope of brushing off casually.

[Sharpen], [Lethal Flow], even the quick-hack I'd thrown at the netrunner—I could kind of make those fit into the narrative I'd been spinning for Valeria.

High-stress instinct, brute-force application of Anima, and a lot of luck.

But materializing a fully functional plasma torch out of thin air?

Yeah, there was no smooth way to spin that.

My mind raced, searching for anything, *anything* that would sound even remotely plausible.

Fortunately, [Deception] slid in and threw me a lifeline. I drew in a sharp breath, then met Valeria's steel-gray gaze, keeping my tone as controlled as I could.

"I... honestly can't explain that one," I admitted, letting just enough frustration leak into my voice to make it sound genuine.

"I just—" I gestured vaguely with my hands, mimicking the frantic state I'd been in. "—thought of the first thing that came to mind when I realized Gabriel's wounds needed to be cauterized. The image that hit me was a plasma torch. I'd seen one used just the day

before, on the way to Mr. Shori's—one of the construction workers had been welding a temporary sheet-metal barrier together for a storefront. And... I just tried to *make* it."

I leaned back slightly. "The same way Kill Joy taught me to manifest a chair in the SPG-01 shard's Cyberspace, over and over again. I was desperate, in pain, and hoping that if I pushed hard enough, it would work. And somehow—I guess it did...? That's how I ended up with the torch. I don't really have a better explanation than that."

Silence stretched between us, thick enough to choke on.

My thoughts went absolutely haywire, every second feeling like it dragged out into minutes.

'God, that was a terrible lie...'

I prayed—no, *begged*—that Valeria was tired enough to not be dissecting every single word I'd just said.

I had no idea if manifestation even worked like that in the real world.

Sure, based on what Kill Joy had taught me and everything I knew about how quick-hacks and Cyber functioned, it *should* be possible.

But *should* and *actually does* were two very different things.

If I'd just claimed something utterly impossible to someone who knew infinitely more about Anima than I did, I'd handed her a perfect proof to call me out. And then what? I had no idea what Valeria might actually *do* if she thought I was lying to her face about something like this.

My whole perspective on her was already a complete fucking mess.

I had been so *sure* I had her pegged—a ruthless, cold-hearted corpo bitch who would poison her own kids with NeuroCorpse and call it "education." Somebody that would do anything to get ahead in life, career-wise. A person that didn't care about their family, minus Oliver for whatever strange reason that would sacrifice anyone and anything to the EtherLabs altar.

But then there was last night.

The dinner, where she had outright refused Gabriel's request with such force it had almost felt personal.

The way she'd fought like a demon, clearly ready to die if it meant keeping the family alive.

The very real concession that she couldn't do it and was ready to reveal whatever secrets Nyxstalker had been there for, which had seemingly been a guaranteed death sentence for her; just so Gabriel and I wouldn't die.

The strange, almost *human* warmth in her words afterward when she told me I'd done well.

I didn't know where the hell she stood anymore. And that terrified me.

Deep down, I was *still* extremely scared of her. Intrinsically. Inherently.

That part of me hadn't changed. Not really.

But the real question—the one that gnawed at the edge of my thoughts—was: '*What happens if she catches me lying here?*'

Especially now, when the lies were tied directly to Anima, to the System, to things I couldn't really afford to reveal to anyone that I didn't 100% trust—and even then likely couldn't risk.

I would've preferred this conversation to go anywhere else. Literally *anywhere* else.

But there had been no avoiding it. How could there have been?

You don't just watch your recently-comatose daughter kill several corpo agents with cold efficiency and then pull a plasma torch out of thin air to cauterize your son's stumps and expect to move on without at least one "what the fuck" question.

This conversation had always been going to land here.

There had never really been a way to dodge this talk; not from the moment everything went to hell last night. The instant the kitchen wall blew apart and the door slammed into the far-side wall of the living room, this conversation—if we even made it through alive—had been inevitable.

And yet, sitting here now, I still had no idea what exactly she was trying to pin down. Or worse—what she might do if whatever I said didn't line up with whatever answer she was hoping to hear.

All those thoughts kept circling in my head, clawing for attention during the long silence, while Valeria just sat there, her eyes locked on me like steel pins keeping me fixed to the chair.

Finally, however, she spoke.

"It is difficult to accept that all of these factors aligned so... *conveniently*," she admitted, her voice still clipped in that corporate rhythm, though markedly slower and heavier the longer the conversation went on—exhaustion clearly taking its toll on her. "The timing, your actions, the outcomes thereof—none of it should have fallen into place as neatly as it did. And yet..."

She let the words hang, almost tasting them, before giving the smallest shake of her head. "I have no more suitable explanation to offer at this point in time either."

The pressure in my chest eased a little, and I breathed an inward sigh of relief.

She wasn't calling me out.

The manifestation lie—or *not lie*—had slid by unchallenged.

Which meant maybe it wasn't even a lie at all.

Maybe manifestation in the real world *was* possible, and whatever the System's Inventory was, it had been using that same slice of Anima all along to conjure the random "loot" that it sometimes granted me.

Valeria's voice cut back in, softer this time. "Regardless, I am glad events unfolded as they did."

That threw me for a loop.

My eyes flicked up at her just as a faint, almost alien smile spread across her lips.

It looked wrong on her face—too warm, too... *human*.

Not the mask I'd grown used to.

"I much prefer being alive to the alternative," she said, almost dryly, but the words carried weight. "And we are alive *because* of you. Your actions, however unusual, directly ensured our survival. You performed well, Seraphine. I am... *proud* of what you accomplished yesterday."

I had no clue how to respond, what to do with the words that had been spoken.

I just sat there, thoughts refusing to string together.

Then I noticed it.

My face felt damp.

[Elemental Balance] kept me steady, flat, cold—there was no way for me to do anything else.

And yet, when my fingers instinctively brushed just beneath my eyes, letting myself do so, they came away wet.

I stared at the drops on my hand, dumbstruck.

'*Tears...*'