

Chapter 186 - Reprimand

Sixteen Credits lighter, I made it back to Delta—thankfully without any additional Scav-related incidents.

'*Going to the Megabuilding always costs more than leaving, doesn't it,*' I thought absently, as I pushed my way through the dense, indifferent mass of people moving in and out of the lobby—the usual Delta afternoon crowd, which operated on the collective understanding that everyone had somewhere to be and nobody was particularly interested in making it easier for anyone else to get there.

By the time I'd navigated to one of the elevators, wedged myself out of the crowd into the metal rectangle, and punched in for the 43rd floor, I had the rough outline of a plan assembled.

Nothing elaborate, of course.

Just a sequence of immediate steps in the right order—hopefully.

"First things first," I muttered to myself, pulling up the cerebral interface as the elevator started its ascent. "Misha."

[You have transferred {c}125 to "Misha" with the note: "Repayment. The gear was great! Ela will be around in the next few days—Combo Kit needs a refill."]

I pulled up my full balance on reflex next, just to confirm that what my internal accounting was telling me actually matched reality.

[Currency]

16 {c}

I stared at it for a long moment.

"How the fuck am I already out of Credits *again*?" The words came out flat and genuinely aggrieved, bouncing off the elevator walls. "I just came back from a gig. An *actual* gig. People fucking died—! Like a lot of them! This is *actually* insane."

I knew, of course, *exactly* how I'd ended up here.

Borrowing money I didn't have yet had a well-documented and thoroughly unpleasant way of following you around and eating your earnings before you'd even finished counting them.

Debt was patient in a way that nothing else in Neo Avalis truly was, and it had been doing *exactly* what debt did.

"At least I managed to get it paid off right away instead of having to sit with increasingly compounding interest payments for the next 35 years of my life..."

This had been the *last time*, though.

I'd said so when I'd made the arrangement with Misha: No more borrowing.

Straight purchases only, from here on out.

'... Yeah,' said the part of my brain that had been alive long enough to have heard that exact sentence several dozen times before. '*Absolutely **nobody** has ever had that thought and immediately fixed their financial situation forever. Truly a revolutionary approach there, Ela. "Just decide not to go into debt." Groundbreaking. You should write a book.*'

The elevator was empty by the time it hit the upper floors—the restricted access doing its usual job of ensuring that the ride up to 43 was a private affair, which I was very grateful for.

I didn't have the bandwidth for proximity to strangers right now.

I leaned against the back wall and let my mind work on the Anima Network problem, which had been sitting in the background of everything else since I'd first opened the System Interface in the Ripper's bed and had made the, unpleasant experience of seeing exactly what channeling [Anima Razor] through a katana at Level 2, while exhausted, injured, and *considerably* past the point where any sensible person would have stopped, had done to my internal infrastructure.

The most obvious play—and the one that came to mind immediately—was Valeria.

I turned that thought over for a moment, testing it from a few angles.

We were on—I searched for the right characterization—not *good* terms, exactly, but something in the vicinity of *amicable*, at the very least.

Of everyone I knew in Neo Avalis, Valeria was by a significant margin the most knowledgeable person when it came to Anima—aside from maybe Kill Joy, but I didn't exactly know that guy. The gap between her understanding of it and the next most informed person I could name was *quite* substantial.

'The problem's the explanation...'

Specifically, how I'd managed to even do this to myself in the first place—the mechanics of it, the reasoning for it even being needed and the obvious follow-up question of how I had even ended up in that situation in the first place.

Valeria would want to know. Valeria would ask. And Valeria was not somebody that I could beat with my [Negotiation] and [Deception] Levels in a straight fight—likely not for months, if not years.

'Last time I only got away with it all, because she wasn't actually asking the right questions... Here, there's no way she'll ask the wrong ones. I'll actually have to straight up lie and she'll be able to tell right away that I'm doing so.'

A similar sort of problem applied to Miss K, which was why she was essentially off the table from the start.

Miss K was already operating at the outer edge of her comfort zone with me—the Kenzie incident still made me cringe when it surfaced, and that had been *before* the Sprites had spent several, very painful hours rebuilding my body from whatever cellular baseline they'd decided was correct, which had been its own very awkward conversation.

If I walked into the dojo *now* and asked her to help me fix my damaged hands and a comprehensively fucked up Anima Network, the reaction was *not* going to be a measured one.

She would absolutely help me, no doubt. But she'd also remove me from the dojo group for being a liability and a safety hazard to everyone around me—which... was probably fair.

Her Master was also still a *significant* unknown quantity.

Miss K had mentioned him in ways that suggested he was both deeply knowledgeable and not someone I wanted to walk into unprepared, and I very much did not want that meeting to happen while I was in this state.

'That can definitely wait until I've fixed this all up—or be used as a last resort, if I really can't find anything else that works.'

The next person on my list, however, was more promising.

'Mr. Shori...'

The more I turned that one over, the more it kept coming out on top.

He was the *only* obvious contact who wasn't going to have a problematic reaction to the situation. He wouldn't panic, wouldn't escalate, wouldn't immediately start making decisions about what should be done about me and my general existence.

He'd look at me with the expression of someone who had *explicitly* warned me about something from day one and was now watching the predictable outcome of that warning being imperfectly heeded, and that expression was going to be *very* uncomfortable to receive, but it was survivable—if barely.

More importantly though—and this was the part that kept tipping the calculation massively in his favour every single time—[[Anima Razor](#)] was *his* Technique.

He'd developed it, or inherited it, or found it, or whatever the origin story actually was.

If the Technique was capable of damaging an Anima Network when misused, there was a non-zero chance that Mr. Shori had absolutely encountered this particular outcome before.

Possibly even personally. Maybe even likely.

First-time users of powerful techniques rarely ever got everything right immediately, regardless of how much natural aptitude they had, and Mr. Shori had been working with this for long enough to be bound to have a detailed map of where it could all go wrong.

And knowing Mr. Shori—which I was starting to feel like I genuinely did—he was going to be more relieved that the Technique had kept me alive than upset that I'd pushed it past its recommended limits doing so.

The disappointment would be present, of course. It would be very visible, too. I had no doubt.

*'But it **would** be survivable... Maybe.'*

I'd talked myself into it somewhere between the 35th and 40th floor, which meant that by the time the elevator reached 43 and the doors opened into the floor's hallway, I stood there for approximately three seconds, then turned and punched in for floor 16.

The elevator started back down.

'Early afternoon...'

By the time I read out in the corner of my interface.

Mr. Shori's shop ran on a rhythm I'd mapped over enough days to predict with reasonable confidence—peak around noon, then a lull, then another wave in the late afternoon before the dinner crowd. Right now was the quiet stretch in the middle, the part of the day where he was most likely to be present and least likely to be occupied with customers.

'Perfect timing.'

On the way down, two more options surfaced and I catalogued them mostly out of the need to run a full inventory even when I didn't intend to act on everything on the list.

The first was the Knowledge Shards Valeria owed me.

They were still uncollected and theoretically available.

The main problem with that avenue, however, was that Anima wasn't the kind of topic that translated neatly into a Knowledge Shard format—the whole apparatus of secrecy and restriction around it suggested *strongly* that you couldn't just acquire a comprehensive Anima Network repair guide through standard information channels, even with Valeria's undoubtedly strong access and connections.

'Might exist in some form... But even if it does, there's no shot she'll get it in the next few days—in time for me to fix this fucking mess before Miss K gets suspicious of me missing too many sessions.'

The second option was the one that surprised me by appearing on the list at all.

Kenzie's family.

Kenzie had mentioned that her sister had talked about Spirit Connections in passing at some stage, in a way that had suggested casual familiarity rather than surface-level

knowledge—something that went quite a bit more in-depth than Misha's "*Misha once heard about something like this*" vagueness.

And if Kenzie's sister was already *that* comfortable with it, the parents were likely sitting on *considerably* more. This whole Anima and Spirit business felt like the kind of knowledge to me that got passed down rather than was acquired, after all.

The problem with that option was the approach.

Walking into that household and opening a conversation about Anima without knowing *exactly* how much they knew, what they thought about it, whether they had opinions about people using it who hadn't been properly introduced to it through whatever channels they considered legitimate—that was a navigation problem I wasn't even remotely equipped for right now.

Far too many unknown variables, far too much potential for the conversation to go somewhere I couldn't recover from—with a very real chance it might even get me killed.

'Last resort,' I decided. *'Absolute last resort.'*

The elevator doors opened on floor 16.

I stepped out and headed toward Mr. Shori's shop, hands in my pockets, katana sheath angled across where I'd strapped it between the DuraPack my back—I'd need to get some sort of actual, proper belt or something to easily carry it in the future—the relative quiet of the mid-afternoon thoroughfare around me doing nothing to make what I was about to have to explain feel any less awkward.

The back entrance to Mr. Shori's shop was familiar enough by now that the route from the corridor to the kitchen door was essentially automatic—the particular sequence of turns, the specific door that needed to be lifted slightly before it would open, the smell of broth, algae and the underlying warmth of a kitchen that ran continuously and had for a long time.

He was at the prep counter when I came in, working through what looked like a fresh batch of algae with the same, ever-present rhythm of someone doing a task they'd done thousands of times before.

He looked up at the sound of the door, and the surprise on his face was genuine—a brief, unguarded expression before his eyes did what they always did, which was conduct a rapid and comprehensive assessment of everything in front of them.

"Ela," he said, in his usual, slightly-broken common. "Something wrong?"

The question was, technically speaking, asking if there was anything I wanted to bring up.

The assessment his eyes had already run had answered the factual version of it fairly conclusively, I had absolutely zero doubts.

I switched to Nighon.

"{So...}"

The knife went down on the counter immediately.

Not dropped but placed with a speed that was its own statement.

His attention towards me, which had already been considerable, dialed up to eleven

"{Tell me,}" he said, in Nighon, and it wasn't a question.

I started explaining.

The gig, the foyer, the specific moment where the available options had narrowed to only *one* that I could see at the time, and that one having been his Technique applied through a medium he had *very carefully* never suggested I try.

I reached back for the katana to illustrate the point—

He took it from my hands before I'd finished the motion.

The transformation happened in a fraction of a second—the same man, the same kitchen, but the underlying quality of him had shifted *entirely*.

The jovial, unhurried warmth of Mr. Shori, the ramen shop owner, was simply *gone*, replaced by something that had always been underneath it somewhere and usually stayed there—a focused, absolute stillness that made the space around him feel very different.

To the point the fine hairs on the back of my neck were standing up.

He drew the blade with the practised ease of someone for whom the action was as natural as breathing, held it up to the light filtering in from the prep area, ran his eyes carefully along the edge as if reading he was reading something written in a language he was *very* fluent in.

He tested the grip, checked the balance with a small, precise movement of his wrist, then nodded once and sheathed it in a single clean motion and handed it back to me.

"{Good sword,}" he said, in Nighon. "{But *not* yours.}"

He picked up his knife again and returned to the algae, though the quality of his attention hadn't even remotely returned fully to its previous setting. "{The edge is different from what you put on my knives. Different hand, different technique. Long relationship with this blade.}"

He paused briefly, scooping the algae into a nearby pot.

"{You got it on a recent gig or bought it from someone—but given the edge profile, it's likely the first. Not from a Scav, that much is a given considering the quality.}"

I stared at him for a half-second.

Five seconds with a blade he'd never seen before, and he'd gotten most of the relevant information.

I refocused and described what had happened when I'd run [Anima Razor] through the katana—the Sigil adjustments, the channeling, the buildup, the output.

What it had done to the foyer and, of course, what it had done to me and my hands.

Mr. Shori set the knife down again. Not with the speed of before, but with the deliberate weight of someone who specifically needed *both hands* free to properly convey what they were about to convey.

He *looked* at me.

The disappointed grandpa expression was, *somehow*, even worse than I had anticipated it being, and I had anticipated it being *quite fucking bad*.

"{*Reckless*}" he said, and the word was quiet—which somehow hit even harder than if it had been loud.

"{You should have come to me first. Before ever attempting this with a real blade—especially a long blade.}"

He shook his head.

"{The Technique was for *emergencies*. For when you *had no blade* available. Not—}" he gestured at the katana, "{—not *this*. Not without proper guidance on the channeling adjustments required.}"

Another head shake. "{*Reckless*, Ela. *Very reckless*}"

I took it without argument, because he wasn't wrong on any of the individual points, and arguing with someone who wasn't wrong was a waste of everyone's time.

He looked at me for another moment, then something in his expression softened at the edges.

"{But I am *very* glad you are alive,}" he said, simply. "{The Technique served its purpose. That is what it is for, ultimately: To defeat the enemy and come out alive.}"

His eyes turned serious again then, as he added, "{But you *must* be more careful about the gigs you take. Even with a good Face doing the research—do your own as well. *Always*. Never put your life *entirely* in someone else's hands, even someone you trust.}"

He held my gaze. "{*Never*}"

I nodded, and definitely meant it.

I doubted I could have surfaced what Higgins had missed in this specific case—if even the OPN itself hadn't flagged the Scrapwright affiliation, my own research wasn't going to have done better. But the *principle* was very sound regardless, and it was the kind of advice that had applications *beyond* merely this particular situation.

I was going to try to implement it.

Mr. Shori gestured for me to show him my hands, and so I did.

He looked at them—the scarring across the joints, the residual stiffness and shaking still visible in the way I held them—and pulled a short, sharp breath in through his closed teeth.

"{Yes,}" he said, nodding slowly. "{I know this *very* well.}"

The relief that moved through me at those words was significant enough that I felt it physically, almost making me stumble.

"{Come,}" he said, already moving toward the front of the kitchen. "{Sit.}"

He gestured at the counter stool with the authority of someone who wasn't offering a suggestion, and I sat.

He moved to the broth station with the ease of long practice, and I watched him start assembling a bowl with the quick, automatic competence of someone who could do this in their sleep and occasionally probably even *had*.

"{Is there something in the ramen?}" I asked. "{For the Anima Network—some secret ingredient that—}"

Mr. Shori turned and *looked* at me.

The look was comprehensive, specific and communicated, without any ambiguity whatsoever, that he found the question somewhat beneath the both of us.

"{No,}" he said, with the flat patience of someone explaining something to a person who should have been able to work it out. "{How would a soup fix an Anima Network? Have you hit your head as well?}"

He set the bowl down in front of me and pointed at it.

"{Eat. You have not eaten in—what, a full day? *More?*}"

He shook his head.

"{Eat, girl.}"

I opened my mouth to reply... then closed it.

He was absolutely right.

I was—I did a rapid inventory and arrived at the conclusion that I was, in fact, *extremely* hungry, in the way you got when you'd been running on adrenaline and medical intervention for long enough that the hunger had stopped being a conscious thing and was just sitting there quietly, waiting.

Whatever Dex had injected me with had kept the machinery running but hadn't actually addressed the fuel situation at all.

I picked up the chopsticks and started eating.

The broth hit somewhere *deep*—rich, savoury and warm, filling a gap I hadn't consciously registered until the first mouthful confirmed its existence. I ate with considerably less dignity than I would've preferred and found I didn't particularly care at that exact moment.

Mr. Shori, meanwhile, had crossed to the far end of the kitchen—the section near the back wall, past the secondary prep area, where a row of drawers sat flush against the surface.

He pulled two open, then a third.

Then a small, precise **click** sounded, and the mirror panel I'd always taken to be nothing but a decorative element—and, quite literally, a mirror—swung inward slightly, revealing a narrow compartment behind it.

He reached in and withdrew a notebook.

It was made from paper. *Actual* paper, bound and aged at the edges in the way of something that had been consulted many times over many years.

He brought it back to the counter, set it down, and reached into his front pocket.

He put on glasses.

I stopped eating for a moment, the chopsticks mere centimeters from my mouth, frozen.

Glasses. In Neo Avalis. On a man with Cybernetic eyes, who I had never *once* seen require any form of visual assistance for anything, including reading labels on ingredient containers from across a kitchen in low light.

He caught me staring without looking up from the notebook.

"{Decryption,}" he said, and tapped the frame of the glasses once with one finger.

Then he pointed at the bowl. "{Eat, girl.}"

I continued to eat.

The demotion from *Ela* back to *girl* registered with a mild, specific pang that I felt was entirely deserved under the circumstances, and I accepted it with the grace of someone who had earned it fair and square.

'Just gotta work my way back up when this is all dealt with...'