

Chapter 161 - Trust (Redux)

Of all the reactions they could've had, *that* one was nowhere on my list—which, looking back, was embarrassingly naïve on my part.

'Obviously they'd want the magic wall-running and the magic fucking super-blade, you idiot. What exactly did you think was going to happen when you flashed that in front of them?! They'd just go "oh, that's neat, thanks for showing me, but I'm good"?!'

I was still bent slightly forward, catching my breath from the [Anima Razor], so I had a couple blessed seconds to think before either of them expected me to say anything.

My hands still throbbed, but nowhere near the “crippling agony for hours” level the technique used to inflict before.

Honestly... the difference was kind of wild.

Faster activation, smoother control, and my fingers weren't even completely busted.

If push came to shove, I could probably fire it off again. Maybe twice, if I really pushed it.

'That's stupidly good progress... A few more Skill levels for it, maybe a dip into [Manifestation], and some more Anima Attribute... this could actually turn into something properly usable.'

But none of that helped me with the actual problem in front of me.

How the hell was I supposed to talk myself *out* of this?

It wasn't that I was opposed to teaching them Anima in principle.

If anyone deserved answers or tools to defend themselves, it was these two.

But wanting to teach and *being able* to teach were two completely separate things, and right now, I knew absolutely jack-shit.

My entire understanding of Anima could fit inside a shot glass, sloshing around sadly with room to spare. Jade and Misha, just from watching me for five minutes, probably now possessed about fifty percent of my total working knowledge.

The blind leading the blind wasn't exactly a solid foundation for learning about an entirely different dimension of reality—it was all but a recipe for someone blowing a hole in their hand or slicing their own face off.

And I just so happened to like both of their faces.

Additionally, judging by the way Miss K had reacted when she had learned about how Mr. Shori had taught me Sigils first—*before* anything else—there was clearly a reason Anima wasn't just passed around like a party trick.

It needed proper structure; guidance.

Someone who knew what the hell they were doing.

Which... yeah. Definitely wasn't me yet.

'But maybe that, in itself, is already good enough for now? They're not unreasonable...'

I took a slow, steadying breath and pushed myself upright, trying to regain at least a little dignity after almost toppling over.

"Ela wouldn't mind trying to teach Misha and Jade, but Ela cannot do so yet," I said, putting a hand up before either of them could jump in with the inevitable protests. "As mentioned, Ela has only recently learned about the existence of Anima, and Ela's knowledge is very, very limited. The only reason Ela has not been torn apart by Ela's own uses of Anima is pure, unadulterated luck."

I pointed toward the durasteel plate still in Misha's hands.

The Gryplik had picked it up like it was some priceless artifact, examining the impossibly clean cut as if expecting it to start talking.

"That blade uses something called Sigils. That's... almost everything Ela knows about how it functions. And Ela is *not* exaggerating here. The Sigils were taught to Ela by an acquaintance, but even they don't understand what the Sigils actually do, how they do it, or how catastrophically dangerous they actually are. When Ela first showed even the beginnings of that Sigil-sequence to a more experienced Practitioner—that's what Anima users are called, apparently—Ela was chewed out *thoroughly*. Ela was told to *never* show those Sigils again until much, much more experienced."

It wasn't until I said it out loud that the realization hit me like a brick to the face.

"...And Ela has, in fact, just broken that rule," I admitted, rubbing the back of my neck with a wince. "So. Ehh. Ela would ask Jade and Misha not to tell *anyone* about this part in particular. Even more so than everything else. Even though you both already agreed to secrecy, *definitely* do not mention Sigils. Ela does not want to be snapped over a knee like a twig."

An uninvited, teenage-body-hormone-driven thought wriggled its way up before I could stop it—*'Although... having Miss K break my back like a glowstick might not be that terrible a thought...'*—and heat crept into my face immediately at the sheer indignity of it.

*'What the fuck is **wrong** with you, Sera? I know it's been a while, but fuck me, keep yourself together,'* I thought, as I fought to keep myself from facepalming in front of the other two.

Thankfully, both Jade and Misha were still staring at the bisected durasteel, too distracted to notice my thoughts had very briefly wandered into *extremely* questionable territories that would hopefully never happen again.

Misha was the first to react, humming thoughtfully as she turned the bisected durasteel plate over in her hands.

“Misha accepts this reasoning. It is wise to know one’s limits of knowledge. And wiser still not to teach dangerous things one does not fully understand.” She tapped the edge of the plate with three of her fingers, almost absentminded. “Misha would not teach creating chemical explosives without knowing much about them either.”

Both Jade and I froze for a beat at that.

The way she’d phrased it implied—very clearly—that she *was*, in fact, teaching exactly that to someone.

Misha didn’t correct herself.

She just blinked at us with calm, innocent confusion, as if wondering why we were staring at her.

Jade blinked several times—hard—then shook her head like she was clearing static before turning back toward me.

“Jade is... admittedly disappointed,” she admitted, arms crossing loosely. “But Jade can’t exactly fault Ela for not wanting to teach super dangerous things.”

She gestured vaguely between my hands and the bisected durasteel plate. “Even if simply knowing about it *at all* is already... apparently dangerous.”

She hesitated, then added, quieter, “So... this danger. What is it actually? Because so far it sounds incredibly vague at best.”

I winced and shook my head. “Ela cannot say more because Ela doesn’t *know* more. Not really. The people who warned Ela were all very clear that the danger is real—the kidnapping, torture, death pipeline kind of real—but none of them explained who or what is behind it. Ela only knows that certain extremely high-ranking corpo people already *do* know about Anima, which... probably puts this whole thing into the ‘black-site project’ tier or just a tier below it.”

Their faces tightened at that, especially Jade’s.

“So Jade and Misha should treat it like... knowing *extremely* sensitive internal corpo project details,” I continued, keeping my voice firm. “Absolute secrecy. Not a word. Not to anyone.”

I met Jade’s eyes deliberately.

And she met mine.

For several long seconds we simply held each other’s stare, my meaning plain even without words. And I was very glad that Jade was one of the smart people in this world, who got the unspoken meanings behind words instinctively.

Vega's protege, measuring the angles, the consequences, the leverage.

But underneath it all, something steadier flickered inside those eyes as well—a sort of hunger or ambition, maybe?

But definitely *understanding*.

After several beats, she gave me a single, small nod.

A breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding for a while finally left me, tension draining out of my shoulders.

'She's not going to tell Vega. Not yet, at least. Maybe that'll change someday... but as long as I keep her in the loop, I might actually be in the clear here.'

I finally decided to sit back down on the improvised seat from earlier, not feeling like standing any longer. A few seconds later, Jade followed suit with a quieter kind of thump, though Misha was still off to the side, practically nose-to-metal as she continued scrutinizing the durasteel plate like it held the secrets of the universe.

"Ela has managed to get a teacher, of sorts," I began, settling back against the mountain of clothes behind me. "Still unsure what and how much, exactly, they'll be able to teach, but if Ela can acquire enough understanding and knowledge, Ela promises to teach Jade and Misha about Anima. Until then... Ela hopes that knowing all this explains at least some of the strangeness that's been going on around Ela."

I lifted my hands a little in a vague gesture. "Ela is willing to take any questions for now—better to deal with it all now than let unspoken questions fester, yeah?"

That finally tore Misha's attention away from the bisected plate. The Gryplik lumbered over and reclaimed her usual perch, settling onto it with an expectant trill.

"Is this whole Anima thing part of the reason Ela is not... well... *dying* right now?" Jade asked, flicking her fingers loosely in my general direction. "Like—some sort of healing enhancement?"

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "That's basically it. The Anima does... *something* to improve Ela's healing capabilities. Ela has no idea *how*, exactly. But Ela was fully recovered maybe half a day after the surgery."

Both Jade and Misha went slack with shock—exactly what I'd expected, honestly.

I did want them to understand the scale of weirdness we were dealing with, when it came to Anima as a whole—although part of it was the System's fault, obviously. But by all metrics I could use to measure, the System *was* Anima, in a way... So I wasn't exactly lying.

And I wanted them to understand that I trusted them enough by now to let them in on this—because this was the kind of information that corps would murder entire families to get a whiff of.

Near-instant recovery from major physical trauma? Yeah. That wasn't small stuff.

If even just the pharmaceutical corporations were the only ones interested in this kind of knowledge, I'd be more than surprised.

"And Ela's blood disappeared because of Anima too, yes?" Misha asked eagerly.

I nodded. "Ela leaves no physical traces for long. Blood, spit, footprints, sweat, hair—doesn't matter. Anything Ela leaves behind that counts as a trace is removed by Anima. No idea why or how. Ela hasn't found a way to turn it off, either."

"Fuck me... So that's how..." Jade breathed, staring at me with an expression that was one part awe, one part *hunger*. For someone whose entire life more or less revolved around stealth and escape, this was like dangling the juiciest of steaks in front of a starving lion.

"And Ela is *sure* this can't be taught...?" she pressed, inching closer. "Even if it can't be turned off? Jade wouldn't really mind if it was... y'know... active all the time. Could definitely learn to handle that kind of problem."

I nodded gravely, having to smother the small, bubbling laugh that threatened to slip out at the sheer sparkle in Jade's eyes—but laughing here didn't feel right.

She wasn't joking.

She was genuinely *starving* for a way to get better, to stop feeling like she was behind everyone else, and I understood that feeling a little too well.

"Yeah... that's one of the parts Ela knows the least about, unfortunately," I admitted, rubbing at my forearm as I tried to put it into words. "These weird... powers—whatever we want to call them—they just kind of... *appear*. Ela doesn't go hunting for them. They show up when they want to show up, like they're part of whatever the World's plans are. Or something equally vague and unhelpful as that."

I winced at how stupid that sounded even as it left my mouth.

"One of Ela's acquaintances—someone who actually knows things about this whole Anima mess—said that the World, capital W, has started taking interest in Ela for some reason." I hesitated for a second, then added, "That's apparently why the Sprites... uhh, think of them as the smallest particles of Anima, sort of atom-like but maybe a little sentient?—keep reworking Ela's body every now and then."

I flexed my fingers, then my arms.

They both immediately zeroed in on the motion like hawks.

I wasn't ripped, but the difference to just a few days ago was very noticeable. Absolutely a definition around my biceps and just along the entire musculature in my arms that had never really been visible like this before.

Body 6 had done a lot of work.

“But don’t misunderstand,” I continued, letting my voice drop a shade lower as I met their eyes in turn. “This *isn’t* without consequences or major risks.”

Their attention sharpened instantly.

“When the Sprites rework Ela’s body... it is *painful*. Horrifically so. They pull apart muscles, tendons, bone structures, nerve bundles—everything—microscopically, then stitch it all back together stronger than before.” I tapped my sternum lightly. “It feels like being dismantled and rebuilt in real time. Without Ela’s weird healing enhancements from the Anima as well, Ela isn’t sure if it would be survivable. Or if surviving is even the right wording... maybe it’d just take months to recover each time.”

Both of them stared, wide-eyed—Jade pale, Misha’s tufts flattened halfway in distress.

“Point is,” I finished, leaning back a bit, “whatever Ela has... it’s not clean at all. Definitely not safe. Not something Ela would give out, even if Ela understood what was happening, unless there was a way to get around the dangers.”

Jade deflated a little at that, clearly still having hoped that maybe there was something I could teach her that could help her immediately improve in some capacity, but she also nodded slowly. “Jade understands... That really does not sound fun at all.”

“Definitely not fun...” Misha confirmed with a series of nods of her own, then stopped mid-way through and tilted her head. “But potentially interesting to observe, yes.”

I chose to ignore that last part, then spread my arms in an invitation, “Anything else Jade or Misha want to ask about this whole thing?”

And they both asked every question they could come up with...

—

It took around an hour to get through everything, most of it me deflecting with a frustrated “Yeah, Ela wishes Ela actually knew that,” which—honestly—wasn’t even a lie.

I *wanted* to give them clean answers, not the repeated variations of “*Sorry, no clue*” that ended up making up half the conversation.

Still, little by little, the questions slowed, and both of them eventually settled into a kind of cautious satisfaction.

We’d shifted around a lot over that hour, dragging crates and cloth and cushioning into something that resembled a lopsided nest more than proper seats.

The first setup had been fine for a few minutes, but absolutely awful for anything longer, so the three of us had gradually built up this weird, cozy arrangement as the conversation went on.

Somewhere along the way, I'd ended up divulging a fair amount of my physical toolkit—mostly because Jade's questions kept hitting a bit too close, and Misha's curiosity had a way of boring straight through defenses.

I'd talked about [Blademaster's Strike] when Jade had asked about the incident with that annoying Valir-brat and covered most of my other physical-related Perks like [Ambidexterity] as well, though I made very sure to keep every mental aspect far, *far* away from the table.

All the more abstract Perks—[Spiritus Machina], [Cultural Savant], anything that smelled even remotely like System-assisted knowledge—stayed firmly unmentioned.

Same for the more... magical ones, like [Resourceful Chef].

I had no clue how to begin explaining that one anyway, especially as I had not even used it yet.

Even so, between everything I *had* shared, both Jade and Misha walked away with a surprisingly solid picture of what my physical capabilities looked like.

More than anyone else in this world knew at this point.

A small, uneasy knot lingered in the back of my mind when I glanced at Jade.

She wasn't mine—not in loyalty, not in priority—and she reported to Vega first.

Yet... everything I had shared with her didn't feel like a *terrible* risk.

My Intuition had been weirdly active throughout this whole conversation, nudging me toward certain topics and away from others, arranging my scattered abilities into something that *looked* coherent and logical, even to me.

From the outside, it must have seemed like I'd revealed practically everything I knew, as I had not blitzed off any of their questions even once. In reality though, it had just been my gut pointing me away from anything that wasn't purely physical.

Anything that hinted too hard at Anima altering my immediate knowledge or brain had stayed locked away without a second thought.

'Which, to be fair, still sounds extremely smart and logical to do, now that I think about it. So... yeah. Good job, Sera. And good job, Intuition. Great teamwork, you two. Keep it up.'

It felt decidedly odd to spill so much of myself to what were, if I was being blunt, still basically strangers—though that was sort of how friendships started, wasn't it?

You handed someone a piece of trust and hoped they didn't drop it.

And both Misha and Jade had already done that for me.

They'd trusted me first, when I'd asked them for time to explain, which they'd given without complaint.

So this—me offering something real back—was just the natural next step in the progression.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

Repeatedly.

‘And I’m definitely not just running that line on loop to make myself believe it. Nope. Just very deep, very normal philosophical musings. Totally normal, yep.’

Either way, our little meeting started winding down.

Not just because guilt was nibbling at my heels—Misha’s poor shop had been closed for hours thanks to me—but because we had simply hit the bottom of the Anima-topic barrel.

Questions answered, mysteries acknowledged, and no real way forward until I actually learned more myself.

On top of that, the day was getting late enough that the lights inside the Emporium had started shifting more evening-cozy than midday-bright, the kind of lighting that made you realize just how late it really was getting.

So we wrapped things up, the three of us sitting in our lopsided nest of crates and cloth like we were finishing the world’s strangest study session.

I pushed myself to my feet, brushing off a few non-existent threads, and turned to Misha first.

“Ela will be back soon. To shop... and to talk,” I said, and I meant it. “Misha can message Ela whenever Misha feels like it.”

Her tufts perked instantly, ruby eyes lighting up with that warm, earnest friendliness she never even tried to hide. “Misha will! *Friend* Ela must also message Misha, yes! Always welcome here, whenever.”

I smiled softly at that. Then I faced Jade.

She’d already stood, hands in her pockets, trying very hard to look casual despite the million thoughts clearly racing behind her eyes.

“I will get in contact when I have more information,” I told her. “Or if I need anything specific in regards to your other duties. But you can also message whenever.”

I hesitated for a second, then added, “Seriously. Whenever, alright?”

Jade gave a short nod—almost crisp, almost formal—but the look in her eyes was warmer than I’d ever seen from her. “I will. And... thanks. For trusting me with all this. I... I wasn’t expecting that.”

I nodded back, then glanced between them both.

“One last reminder,” I said, tone dipping into something dead-serious. “*Everything* Anima-related stays between us. Not for friends, not for coworkers, not for curious idiots. Not for anyone. This is for your sake as much as Ela’s. *Seriously.*”

They both answered immediately.

“Misha will not tell anyone,” Misha said, tufts flattening in solemn promise.

“Jade understands,” Jade added. “No slip-ups.”

And with that, our strange little secret meeting finally came to a close.

Misha lumbered off toward the front, flipping signs and tapping through security measures with the practiced ease of someone who could probably rebuild her entire shop from pieces of scrap if she really had to.

The Emporium hummed back to life for the evening crowd.

Jade gave me a last nod before slipping out into the neon-lit thoroughfare, already vanishing into the shifts of foot traffic like she’d never been there at all.

And I... I headed back toward the nearest elevator to get back to the apartment Valeria had set me up in, letting the day finally settle across my shoulders.

Finally, there wasn’t anything left that absolutely needed doing for the moment.

No fires to put out. No secretive meetings. No looming deadlines gnawing at my spine.

Tomorrow, though... Tomorrow was going to be a whole different marathon once again.

The next Arkion Dojo session was on the schedule, which meant I’d have to bullshit my way through explaining what, exactly, had happened to my body since the last time they’d seen me—and more importantly, *how* I’d somehow managed to jump several rungs up the ladder in performance overnight.

Miss K would *absolutely* demand answers straight away—of that, I had no doubt.

The rest of the dojo crew would have questions of their own.

And I sure as hell didn’t have a rehearsed explanation ready for any of them.

But the chance to actually *test* the new Attribute rank-ups... and [Flow]...?

That part had me positively buzzing with excitement.

But first, I’d probably need Miss K’s help to even begin covering my ass on the “how did Sera suddenly turn into a different person” front.

But that was something tomorrow’s Sera would deal with.

Today’s Sera was absolutely fucking done and needed another nap...