

Chapter 199 - Shards

I picked up the katana—sheathe and all—and pushed myself up off the bed, taking a few measured steps toward the center of the room.

Or as center as I could really get, at least, given that the partial divider for Gabriel's side of the room cut off any actual *true* center.

Thinking about Gabriel, however, brought a small pang of concern up to the surface.

He'd been gone several days now.

I had no real idea what was going on with either him or Oliver—only that Valeria's general demeanor hadn't curdled into anything *worse*, which implied, at the very least, that both of them were somewhat *stable* in some manner. Hopefully recovering, or at least not actively declining. But it was quite a long way from actually *knowing* how they were doing.

'Something I should ask Valeria about,' I thought, filing it mentally. 'Next time she surfaces long enough for an extended conversation again.'

Not that there was actually anything I could *change* about their conditions right now, at this very moment. I was still fairly worried, however, beneath all of it.

That part wasn't going anywhere on its own. But worrying without action just churned, so I pushed it aside and brought my focus back to the present.

I had a Perk to test.

I held the sheathed katana in front of me, fingers wrapped around the grip just above the guard, and focused on [Singing Resonance].

Nothing happened.

'Alright. So it does have to be unsheathed, as expected. The sheathe isn't exactly a blade, technically speaking, so that checks out.'

Next, I gave the katana a gentle pull—drew it out maybe a centimeter from the sheathe, just enough to expose the very base of the plasteel—and focused on the Perk again.

Still nothing.

'Huh. So held is apparently a more defined term than just "I'm in physical contact with the blade in some capacity."'

Which, on reflection, made quite a bit of sense too.

In the actual game, "held" items had to be *fully equipped*—not just sitting on the hotbar, so to speak, or partially drawn or being mid-transition between states.

Looks like the System enforced those distinctions with absolute precision here as well.

I kept incrementally pulling the katana from its sheathe, continuously refocusing on the Perk to catch the exact moment the activation became possible.

About a quarter of the way out—nothing.

Halfway—still nothing.

Three quarters—yep, still nothing.

Finally, with the curve of the blade fully visible and only the last sliver of metal still tucked into the sheathe—and the Perk *finally* found purchase, exactly at the moment somewhere around 90% of the blade had cleared it.

A gentle, chime-like ringing started somewhere in the air around the katana itself—not particularly loud, nor piercing, just a soft, sustained tone that resonated through the steel and the room and somewhere in the back of my own perception simultaneously.

It was downright *pleasant*, actually—like a wind chime catching a single, sustained note and somehow holding it.

As the Perk took hold, my mind was instantly flooded with information about the room.

It hit all at once and required a few seconds to actually parse—not because it was overwhelming, the way the Anima Sight overload had been, but because the *type* of information was new and my brain didn't yet have a framework for how to organize it.

It wasn't visual, nor was it auditory in any normal sense of the word either.

It was more like—*awareness*. A direct knowledge of where things were in the space around me, without needing to look or listen for them in any conventional way.

The bed behind me, the headboard, the precise distance between me and the nightstand. The exact shape of the floor beneath my feet, including the very slight, almost imperceptible dip in the carpet near the entry to the room. The far wall, *exactly* where I knew it was.

The room divider-wall was within the radius and the Perk passed through the thin, partial metal without any issue or impediment.

I could feel the shape of his empty bed beyond it, with the unused blankets that Valeria had, at some point, placed on top of it.

All of it registering as cleanly as if there had been nothing in the way at all.

The actual walls of my room, however, cut everything off sharply.

The living room beyond the bedroom door registered as a complete blank—opaque to the resonance entirely. Same with Oliver and Valeria's room that should be just beyond the northern-side wall—for a lack of better terminology—of the room.

The walls were likely too thick for the sound to penetrate.

The most interesting result of all, however, came from my wardrobe.

The door of it was thin enough—just some unnamed, lightweight composite paneling—that the resonance passed through into the interior without much resistance. I could *feel* the *shape* of the inside, the rough geometry of the space, the floor and back wall.

But the exact *contents*?

Mostly a jumbled mess. Bundles and folds of fabric, layers of different clothing items piled on top of each other, hangers spaced at uneven intervals, a couple of folded items shoved unceremoniously into corners—I could tell all of that, but none of it was actually *distinct*.

The Perk gave me a vague, fuzzy impression of *something fabric-heavy in here* and not much more. No “this is a pink t-shirt with a unicorn on it” or anything—not that I owned any of those. The clutter and softness of the contents seemed to scatter or absorb whatever was carrying the information, breaking up the resolution to the point that I couldn’t easily pick out individual items at all.

'Interesting,' I thought, slowly turning in place to test how the awareness updated with my orientation. *'So it's not omniscient. Soft materials degrade it. Solid walls block it entirely. Thin partitions pass it through but reduce coverage of what's behind them, depending on what's in the space being scanned. That's—really useful intel.'*

It was *also* a near-perfect six-meter bubble of *I know exactly what is happening around me*, which, in any actual combat scenario, would might have been the single biggest defensive upgrade I’d ever picked up.

I was about to sheathe the katana again and go back to finishing the rest of my Level-Ups, when another thought hit me.

*'Hmm. I **should** test that.'*

I moved closer toward the door to the living room, keeping close attention to the sphere of [Singing Resonance] around me—which kept getting cut short at the door and the surrounding wall, exactly as it had been since I’d activated the Perk.

That was, until I was about twenty centimeters in front of the door.

At which point I suddenly gained awareness of a small portion of the living room beyond it.

Not much. Just the tiniest little bubble of perception stretching past the door—barely a half-meter beyond it.

*'Huh. So it **can** go through solid doors and walls!' I realized, slightly delighted by the discovery. 'I just don't have enough AoE coverage to overcome the penalty of trying to push through that much material... Which means the closer I am to a wall, the more of what's behind it I can theoretically pick up. That's very good to know.'*

Satisfied with my brief Perk experiments, I put away the katana—leaning it carefully back against the nightstand—and flopped back down onto the bed.

'Two more to go,' I told myself, eyeing the System interface. 'Hopefully the Network plays nice. Then I'm done with Level Ups until it's fully repaired and I can get the Level 5 upgrades.'

I decided on the [Acrobatics] Level 4 download first. Then [Deception]'s Level 4.

Specifically in that order, because [Acrobatics] downloads had historically been the tamest of the bunch—mostly muscle memory with a thin layer of theory on top—and I wanted to ease into the heavier knowledge-based weight class [Deception] sat in rather than open with it.

With nothing much to lose, I quickly confirmed the [Acrobatics] Level 4 download.

True to form, it slid in with significantly less fanfare than [{Anima Razor}] had.

No cold edge biting into my brain, no creeping Anima whispers, no jarring sense of internal upheaval—just a good old, smooth and fluid integration that went straight to where it actually needed to live: In my muscles, my joints and my reflexes.

Where Level 3 had laid down the foundations of advanced acrobatic movement, Level 4 took all of it and refined it more for *combat* contexts specifically. While some of what it taught was still “generalistic”, so to speak, most of Level 4 was focused on the combat-side of things.

Effectively, pure acrobatic ability applied *under pressure*, such as combat-rolls that ended in low ready stances rather than standard recoveries, leaving me already loaded to strike or move. There were also aerial transitions that maintained sightline on multiple opponents simultaneously, as well as off-balance recovery work for when something hit me mid-motion and threw my trajectory off, teaching me how to adapt landings on the fly into something usable rather than just sprawling.

A rather *significant* chunk of it was fall management... Which probably made a lot of sense.

'After going up against Miss K... Can never have enough knowledge about how to fall properly.' I couldn't help but think, mid-download.

Drops from heights I previously would have considered borderline suicidal—three stories, four—became something I could theoretically survive with the right body positioning and rolling technique.

Not unharmed, of course. But still potentially *functional* rather than catastrophic.

There was also more for the parkour-adjacent layer—likely from my Perk choice for [Acrobatics], nudging the Skill in that direction as well: Wall transitions, running ascents, springing rebounds in narrow spaces. How to use unstable surfaces—railings, narrow ledges, broken debris—as functional movement infrastructure rather than obstacles.

The Megabuilding and Neo Avalis itself, both had a *lot* of vertical real estate, and being able to actually navigate it three-dimensionally without having to exclusively rely on [Wall-Runner] was hopefully going to pay off markedly in the future.

The theory layer, however, was rather thin, as expected.

Some momentum conservation, some energy management for sustaining acrobatic output over longer engagements without burning out.

When it all settled, I rolled my shoulders and stretched experimentally.

My limbs felt *primed*. Like the chassis that was my body had been quietly retuned and was waiting for me to find an excuse to use it.

The Network gave me a small, mildly aggrieved twinge in my arms and legs—nowhere near as bad as yesterday's Anima Attribute upgrade had been, but still markedly annoying.

'Okay. Still mostly good, I'd say... Just one more.'

I queued up [Deception] Level 4 next, as the final upgrade that needed doing.

Where [Acrobatics] had been almost all body, [Deception] was almost all *head*, and Level 4 hit accordingly hard. If Level 3 had been a full year of rogue university classes, Level 4 was the postgraduate version—picking up exactly where the previous year had left off and proceeding directly into more advanced material.

The body-language manipulation got significantly more granular.

Layered emotional states, now—projecting outward calm while subtly broadcasting beneath-the-surface tension that an observant person would clock as *she's hiding something*, when in reality I'd be hiding exactly what I *wanted* them to think I was hiding.

False tells and baits, double-layered deceptive movements. Giving someone the satisfaction of having "caught" you on a small lie so they'd stop looking for the bigger one.

It was honestly kind of horrifying to suddenly understand all of that at a structural level.

The polished, controlled people I'd watched over the past few weeks and months—Valeria, Vega, even Cryo and Higgins to some extent—had clearly been operating at *least* at this layer since the very first time I had met them... Probably even higher.

Before I could really think about this, however, the download overran my thoughts with the next package.

It covered conversation-control methods, which were upgraded similarly.

The Level 3 suggestion-planting evolved into what the System termed *narrative architecture*—constructing entire false contexts around a target's perceptions, layering information over time so that by the time the actual deceptive payload arrived, their own brain would do most of the heavy lifting in accepting it.

They wouldn't be lied to so much as they'd lie to themselves on your behalf.

Genuinely *dirty*. Even reviewing it as mere theory, I felt vaguely uncomfortable with the implications—although... *technically*, it was basically exactly what I had done to Kenzie just the day before as well with the whole "Neo Avalis is super dangerous" bit.

'Hum... That might have been unnecessarily crude, now that I think about it...'

Combat applications also expanded, if in limited capacity—[Deception] was primarily a social Skill, after all.

Beyond simple feints, the download threaded in something the System called *tactical misrepresentation*—deliberately performing at a consistent, repeatable sub-skill level for an entire engagement so an opponent built their whole strategy around that read of you, only for you to then reset to your actual ceiling at the critical moment.

Aka. professional-level sandbagging.

I had, accidentally, *also* been doing pieces of this with Kenzie yesterday—this one unintentionally, however. The cracked ribs had *forced* me into a movement style that wasn't my actual one, and I'd watched her recalibrate her entire approach around the new baseline.

If I'd been doing it *deliberately*, with the option to drop the act on demand...

'Should net me some easy wins in the Arkion Dojo, at the very least... Although probably not against Tom. He'd read right through it, I'd imagine.'

The download finally settled after that.

My head pounded—a dull, persistent throb behind my eyes—and my entire body felt like it had been laid down over a low, steady flame.

Manageable, for sure.

I *could* function through it without much trouble. But it definitely wasn't comfortable in the slightest, and the burn wasn't fading as quickly as the smaller twinges from earlier had.

'Yeah. That's definitely it for now... But glad I managed to push through all the downloads I could. Hopefully won't need any of them today, but better safe than sorry...'

I exhaled slowly and tried to acclimate myself to the new baseline for the foreseeable future—the pounding behind my eyes and the mid-level burn ravaging through my body, courtesy of my Anima Network making its disgruntled, abused opinions on the morning's activities *very* clearly known.

After a few moments of steadying myself—taking slow, careful breaths and waiting for the worst of the pounding to dull down to something I could more easily work around—I pushed myself off the bed and made my way toward the living room.

Even with nothing specifically scheduled for the day, getting the daily morning routine out of the way felt like a good first step, no matter what.

That plan got *immediately* derailed the moment I stepped into the living room.

Three datashards sat arrayed neatly on the kitchen table.

I stopped in the doorway, blinking at them.

'...Guessing Valeria left those for me?'

There was no one else with access to the apartment who could—or would—possibly have done so. The shards had been placed deliberately, in a neat little row, with the kind of precise spacing that absolutely screamed *intentional arrangement*.

Hesitantly—because anything Valeria left on a table without explanation was a thing worth approaching cautiously—I picked them up and slotted them in one after another to see what they contained.

Each one popped up a brief attached note the instant my cerebral link registered the connection.

The first was a *Restricted Shard*.

Loaded with an eye-watering 2,000 Credits.

My eyes almost bulged out of my skull.

That was an absolutely ludicrous amount of Credits to just leave sitting on a kitchen table—restricted or not. The kind of number that, even with Valeria's apparent standing, was clearly meant for a *specific* purpose—which the attached note confirmed with the enacting precision I'd come to expect from her.

*"[Find a high-quality Kinetic Dampening Mask. Remember, Seraphine, to negotiate a period of inspection for it. I will **not** allow wasting valuable resources on lacking equipment.] — Valeria Vildea"*

I wasn't quite sure how Misha was going to feel about the whole inspection-period thing. Probably aggrieved at the implication that her merchandise wasn't already up to the highest of standards, but ultimately professional enough to roll with it—that was my initial guess.

Either way—the 2,000 Credits part she'd be *more* than happy with. *That* was a guarantee.

The second shard was somehow even more surprising, despite being significantly smaller in capacity.

A simple Credit Shard with 150 Credits on it. Not restricted, strangely enough.

The attached note cleared things up.

*"[While I do not exactly agree with your chosen style of haircut, I will not allow a daughter of mine to let her style become **disheveled**. You may keep the remaining Credits for your own purposes. I trust you will not deem to waste them frivolously.] — Valeria Vildea"*

That... was surprisingly nice of her, I couldn't deny.

While my hair *had* been growing rather slowly—a side effect of some of the specialized shampoo and techniques the salon used, specifically designed so any style they applied

would last longer without needing constant re-ups—I was getting to the point where I *really* did need to go back in.

Valeria had almost certainly noticed it during our last conversation and figured she'd fix the problem before it really became one—for her image, that was.

'Nice of her to slip me some allowance alongside it, too,' I thought, turning the small shard over between my fingers. *'What's with her being so unexpectedly nice all of a sudden?'*

I'd ask, except I genuinely didn't think she'd give me a real answer.

Probably some clipped corporate non-explanation about *maintaining standards*. So I let it go.

I plugged in the third, and final, shard.

And the message that popped up hit me like a sledgehammer between the eyes.

*"[As agreed upon, Rina Yonikana's ID. Share your findings about the investigation with me whenever you receive new information. I trust I will **not** have to go out of my way to ask for updates, Seraphine.] — Valeria Vildea"*

My eyes went wide as my brain caught up with what I was actually reading.

A half-moment later, my cerebral interface popped up a small confirmation window, requesting permission to add the attached contact ID to my list.

With a simple thought, I accepted without even thinking about it, almost automatically.

"Holy fuck," I muttered, staring at the third shard like it had grown teeth and tried to bite me. "I figured she'd completely forgotten about this... Or—that she'd quietly let it die without ever bringing it up again. But... apparently not."

I just stood there for a second, holding the functionally empty shard, trying to recalibrate.

There were a *lot* of things I wanted to ask Rina.

About the investigation. About what had *actually* happened to Original Sera in the weeks leading up to the incident. About all the gaps in my memory that I'd been working around since I'd woken up... The list was *very* long, and I'd been mentally drafting it for weeks now—quietly, in the background, in the rare moments when I let myself think about that side of things.

But I was *absolutely* not mentally prepared to just have the ID handed to me. Like this.

Just laying around on the kitchen table, ready for me to pick it up at my leisure.

The three shards also reminded me of yet another shard, that I had to check out—the datashard I had "*acquired*" during the gigs with Higgins and the crew, that was still somewhere inside my DuraPack.

"I guess today became quite a bit more packed than I thought..."