

Chapter 59 - Confrontation

By the time Gabriel returned home, I was deep into my new workout routine, sweat evidence of my dedication. The moment he crossed the threshold and caught sight of me turning our living room into a makeshift gym, his face lit up like he'd just walked into a surprise party.

"Sera! You're back!" His words were like a burst of sunshine, blowing away any fatigue that had been clinging to him—utterly adorable.

"I'm back!" I echoed, my voice riding the same wave of genuine joy. No need for any acting skills here.

Having Gabriel around was always the day's highlight reel for me. He was the closest thing to real, everyday human interaction I got.

Sure, Mr. Shori was in the picture, but that dynamic was more professional, less personal.

Gabriel, though? He brought the kind of warmth and camaraderie that could turn even the most mundane days into something a little more special.

Gabriel paused mid-stride as he approached, a flicker of concern shadowing his face as he took in my battered appearance; which, while fixed up by the surgery and the hospital stay, still showed signs of the utter thrashing I had received. His eyes, until now so full of mirth, mirrored questions he hadn't yet voiced.

Jumping ahead of his worries, I quickly filled him in.

"That Dojo is something else, let me tell you. Miss K, the instructor? She's no joke—a total badass. Just a heads up, she's all about the 'no pain, no gain' philosophy. So brace yourself for a real workout when it's your turn. The Arkion Dojo is a lot more advanced than I had imagined," I said, trying to keep the mood light despite the serious heads-up.

Then, as the memory of my time at the Dojo came flooding back, excitement bubbled over. "But guess what? I met a fox-girl there, Gabe! Yeah, you heard right—a genuine fox-girl, complete with the cutest, fluffiest ears you can imagine!"

My enthusiasm probably painted a vivid picture all on its own. "I was this close to petting them, but chickened out at the last minute. Didn't want to overstep my bounds, you know? But, man, a real-life fox-girl! How cool is that, Gabe?!" My tale tumbled out in a rush, the sheer novelty of it all making me momentarily forget the aches from the training.

"A fox-girl?" Gabriel's eyebrows shot up, his face a mix of awe and disbelief. "You mean, like, someone who's been genetically tweaked? Wow, that's wild! I've always been curious about meeting one. Those genetic mods are way out of my price range, what with them costing an arm and a leg and such. And let's be entirely real, rubbing elbows with the elite isn't *exactly* on my daily agenda at the store," he laughed, his fascination clear despite the jest.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, he shifted gears, "So the Dojo's on another level, huh? What's in store for me? My debut's tomorrow, and I want to hit the ground running, prepped and ready. If you don't mind breaking it down for me, of course."

As I plopped down on our well-worn couch, finally taking a breather from my impromptu living room workout session, I began spilling the beans on everything Arkion Dojo after gesturing for Gabriel to take a seat with me.

It felt good to just sit and chat with Gabriel again, especially since our schedules had been so packed lately, stealing away those casual hangout moments.

For the next hour, I laid it all out—the drills, the atmosphere at the dojo, even snippets from my visit to the ExoClinic, though carefully skipping over my mini heist adventure, of course.

Gabriel hung onto every word, peppering me with questions, eager to soak up as much info as he could. It was like we were making up for lost time, and honestly, it was the most relaxed I'd felt in days.

Gabriel's initial reaction was a cocktail of intrigue and concern, especially at the thought of squaring off against opponents who were more machine than man, or had their DNA spliced with something out of a sci-fi flick.

But as I dove into the details—how Miss K kept a hawk's eye on us pure-humans to ensure the playing field was somewhat level, and the fact that the medical insurance, which was nothing short of stellar, came at no extra charge; as far as I could tell, at least—he began to see it in a new light.

"Guess if my little sis can hold her own there, I've got no excuse to lag behind, do I?" he quipped, signalling the end of our deep dive into dojo life and my cue to finally wash off the day's efforts in a comfortable shower.

We wound down the night with some light conversation, though it didn't stretch too late since both of us were eyeing an early bedtime.

Gabriel, in particular, needed all the rest he could get, facing a marathon day ahead with a double shift followed by his own trial by fire at the dojo. I could almost see him limping home tomorrow, a tragically heroic but utterly spent figure.

As sleep beckoned, a thought struck me—*'I should whip up something substantial at Mr. Shori's for Gabriel tomorrow. That way, he'll have a decent meal ready and can hit the hay as soon as he stumbles in.'*

With that final thought, I decided it was high time I followed suit and drifted off to sleep...

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My eyes fluttered open an instant later, the always-present Rest Function disorientation hitting me square in the jaw as per usual.

[System]: *Rest completed. Time rested: 08:00:00*

[System]: *600 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

I had ended up deciding to make use of the Rest Function again for this night, as I wanted all of the surgery scars and post-dojō marks to be gone, before I headed back into Mr. Shori's stall—didn't really want to give the old man a heart attack with my wrung-through-the-wringer appearance.

My reasoning was pretty straightforward.

As long as I steered clear of Miss K or any familiar faces from the ExoClinic, I figured I could chalk up my miraculous recovery to some of that top-tier Ether Labs medical magic and a heap of tender loving care. It felt like a safe bet, one that would keep Mr. Shori's worry-meter in the green without raising too many eyebrows.

Surprisingly enough, I was greeted by another System Notification as well.

[System]: *300xp gained for [Deception] Skill.*

[System]: *[Deception] has reached Level 1.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Ego Attribute.*

I sat there, simply blinking at the update.

'Okay, that's new...'

I hadn't pulled any fast ones in my sleep, last I checked. But after letting it marinate for a few seconds, it clicked. The experience drop must've been a delayed reaction from the little performance I had put on with Miss K at the dojō about my dizzy spells and the whole act at the ExoClinic.

'It would make sense if the experience drops for something like [Deception] were delayed, from a game-design perspective at least... That way, the player won't know whether their attempt at deceiving another person has succeeded or not,' I thought, trying to piece together the puzzle pieces left behind by the oddly timed System Notification.

This was undoubtedly going to be something I'd have to keep an eye on going forward, whether [Deception] was the only Skill that functioned this way, or if there were other Skills that had delayed experience drops for their usage in order to obfuscate their success rate.

'Why does this System have to be so anti-abuse though? This is basically an isekai, is it not? Shouldn't I just have the most overpowered System around that helps me with everything...? I swear I ended up with the most stingy-ass System of all time...' I couldn't help but lament the System's restrictions once again.

It truly felt like it was designed to make my life as difficult as possible, while still providing invaluable benefits to me, so I couldn't simply ignore it.

Putting those thoughts aside for now, I double-checked what I knew about [Deception] and, much to my surprise, realised that there was a whole heap of things I hadn't known about before.

'The knowledge download must have come through while I was asleep...'

The upside of that was that I didn't have to deal with consciously being aware of everything being downloaded into my brain; but the downside was similarly evident: I was not consciously aware of what all I had actually learned from the Skill's level up.

[Deception], as a Skill, would come in and make sure I didn't go against anything I technically knew not to do, but I was failing to conjure up any *specific* aspects of knowledge, as I didn't actually consciously know about them existing.

It was like trying to remember that one artist's name from one of your favourite songs. The one that is just at the tip of your tongue, but you never seem to be able to remember when you really need it.

'I guess this is the most "passive" Skill out of all of them, in that regard. I'll just have to make sure that I'm awake the next time around, so I can get some more insights into what I'm actually supposed to learn about [Deception]...'

Returning my attention to the world around me, I found the apartment minus one Gabriel, and Oliver still MIA from the night before. It then dawned on me just how deep everyone was in their own slices of the chaos pie.

'Oliver's really caught up in the thick of it, huh? Corporate drama must be hitting new levels of intense if he can't even find his way home to crash anymore,' I mused, feeling a twinge of concern for him. This whole OriginTech mess was unravelling into a bigger deal than any of us had pegged it for at the start.

Back in the game, this whole OriginTech incident was just a slice of the backstory—kind of a legendary tale tucked in the margins, illustrating how they climbed to titan status in the virtual world's economy. Fast forward to reality, and suddenly, I'm watching the drama of OriginTech unfold live, witnessing firsthand the domino effect their founders' actions had on real, actual people.

Oliver's latest work saga really brought it home—pun not intended.

The death of a corpo netrunner wasn't just office gossip; it had morphed into a full-blown crisis, dominating his work life. But it wasn't the loss itself stirring up the storm either.

The real headache? They were in the dark about what data had been compromised, swiped, or messed with, thanks to the chaos unleashed by the netrunner's demise. The aftermath was like navigating a minefield in slow motion.

Sending in a cleanup crew without a clear picture of the threat was off the table. No one wanted to poke a sleeping daemon, especially when it had already shown its fangs.

So, from what little Oliver had managed to share through his work-induced haze over the past week, a dedicated task force was now inching through the company's digital innards. They were on a mission to scrutinise every byte in the servers, a digital sweep of epic proportions.

With Oliver at the helm, being the foreman of the location where the breach was first detected, his days, and very evidently nights, were utterly swamped. He was smack in the middle of the fray, consulting on the operation and ensuring the integrity of every piece of data dredged up by the corpo netrunner task force.

Walking into the living room, I couldn't help but think, *'Man, Oliver's got his plate full. Wouldn't want to trade places with him right now.'* The weight of such responsibility seemed like a Herculean task from where I stood.

Pivoting away from thoughts of Oliver's corporate quagmire to my own agenda, I was all set to test drive some of the fresh insights I'd picked up on maximising experience points through my recent System research.

"Time to amp it up," I psyched myself up, rolling into my workout routine with a twist.

I nudged up the challenge a notch—squeezing in an additional push-up per set, dialling up the intensity with more demanding crunch angles. It wasn't a seismic shift, but just the kind of tweak I was hoping would coax the System into tossing a few extra experience points my way...

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On my way down to Mr. Shori's after my usual workout routine, I went through the stored of Notifications of last evening's workout and this morning's with a big grin on my face.

[System]: *300xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.*

[System]: *[Contortion] has reached Level 2.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *200xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

[System]: *600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 300xp.*

[System]: *Body has reached 5.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for [Stealth] Skill. Available Bonus left: 0xp.*

[System]: *500xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.*

So, the grand experiment with dialling down the intensity of my workouts while still aiming for that xp sweet spot? I had absolutely nailed it.

I ended up bagging just as much, if not a smidge more, experience than the all-out sweat sessions I'd been hammering out the last few days, and all without feeling like I'd gone ten rounds with a heavyweight.

Plus, I hit Body 5, which was a game changer in its own right.

I was now officially done with the “tutorial” ranks in the Attribute, which not only meant that things were going to take a lot longer from now on, but also, that I was now actually kind of strong.

With this latest upgrade, my muscles decided to show off a bit, tightening up and even making a shy appearance.

I am not ashamed to admit that I had stared at my slightly visible abs in the mirror after my customary morning shower for quite a while, before finally throwing on my clothes and heading down towards Mr. Shori's.

I had never had abs before, so it was a big deal for me, okay? Don't judge.

Naturally, I wasn't about to be mistaken for a bodybuilder, and "exceptional" was still a stretch... But among my peers? I was basically in a league of my own by now.

From what I could tell, most folks that I ran into on a daily basis—if they were slapped with a System rating—would hover around a 2 or 3 in Body, max. Though, translating my current teen strength into adult terms, I was probably more like a 3, realistically.

But Kenzie? Oh, I've had her number now. That was not even a question. Next time we squared off, she was going to get to see first-hand what this upgrade could do!

Tamping down my buzz from the morning's personal win, I made my way to Mr. Shori's stall, a ritual as comforting and routine as my first cup of coffee. Weaving through the crowd, blending in with the rush of the morning commute, there was something oddly soothing about being just another face in the crowd—especially after the whirlwind of the past few days.

'Life's really flipped upside down recently, huh?' I mused, a bit of melancholy threading through my thoughts.

As I peeled off from the mass of people, a weird tension abruptly knotted up in my chest.

It was like my body sensed trouble before my brain could catch up, my hand inching toward the hidden reassurance of my combat knife without even thinking.

'What's going on...?' I wondered, my inner alarm bells whispering warnings I couldn't quite decode. Everything looked business as usual—Mr. Shori bustling around his stall, customers queuing up like any other day.

Yet, that nagging feeling clung to me, a whisper that *something* was off, even though everything appeared perfectly normal. My steps quickened, a silent echo of my unease, as I hurried toward the familiar haven of the stall.

That's when I heard it—a gruff voice slicing through the morning hustle, aimed unmistakably at me.

“Wait up there, Miss.”

My body reacted before my mind did, instincts honing in on the potential threat as I spun away, ready to draw my knife.

"Whoa, easy there!" The man backed off immediately, hands up in a peace offering as he stepped back, distancing himself with a gesture toward the alley to my left that he'd emerged from. "Just looking to chat for a sec if you don't mind. Nothing scary, I promise."

But his words, his stance, something about the whole setup felt like it boxed me in, leaving me with a 'choice' that felt anything but.

I looked around carefully, trying to spot anyone else that might belong to this strange person, but I was unable to find anything.

"And what if I *do* mind?" I asked, probing the unknown man.

He was wearing a surprisingly stylish, albeit dirty leather cloak, hiding the rest of his attire and equipment beneath it, making it impossible to tell what exactly his purpose was.

The only thing that was clear, was that he didn't belong.

He was completely out of line with what I came to expect of the 16th floor, both in terms of presentation, presence and clothing choices; making it an easy tell for me to realise this wasn't just your average, random stick-up.

The grin he wore never left his face as he said, "Well that would be most unfortunate, *Ela*."

I felt both my Ego and Edge Attributes kick into overdrive, keeping my face from showing any telling emotions—specifically the surprise and fear that I felt—as I heard the man utter my fake name directly.

My mind went into overdrive, *'How does he know this name...? Is he from Falkum Industries...? If he is, I'm in big shit...!'*

But I knew I had no time to answer any of those questions on my own, as the man was clearly waiting for a response.

"I guess I'll hear you out, at least. Considering all the effort you've gone through to ambush me like this," I offered magnanimously, my Edge and Ego keeping my voice as cold as ice, despite my internal turmoil.

With a beckoning nod, he motioned me to follow him deeper into the alley, a clear indication he wanted this conversation to be more private. Reluctantly, I inched forward, my senses on high alert as I stepped closer towards the shadowed nook he'd chosen for our little exchange.

As I edged closer to the alleyway, the old wisdom of 'never follow a kidnapper to a second location' echoed through my mind, adding a layer of caution to my steps.

'Could I bolt for Mr. Shori's stall...? No, that'd just drag him into whatever mess this was shaping up to be.'

I scanned the surroundings with the subtlety of a cat stalking its prey, while following the strange man further into the alley, away from the main body of people on the small square in front of Mr. Shori's stall.

My gaze snagged on a third-floor balcony, jutting out like a promise of escape over the alley I was being led into. *'That's my out. If push comes to shove, I can make a break for it with [Wall-Runner], assuming this guy isn't packing heat.'*

With a makeshift plan B in my back pocket, I redirected my attention to the man who had now halted some twenty metres into the alley, spinning around to face me with an air of expectation.

His approach was direct, cutting to the chase without any warm-up.

"What business did you have on the 33rd floor?"

The way he said it, it wasn't a question; it was a *demand* for information.

Given he'd dropped my alias with ease earlier, playing dumb wasn't going to win me any points. Besides, outright denial might just escalate things.

Keeping my tone light, I aimed for a mix of deflection and charm. "Just out for a bit of shopping. A girl's gotta have her retail therapy, right?" My sass was deliberate, a tactic to throw him off balance and gauge his response.

Thanks to my [Deception] Skill, which had sprung to life the instant I had planned my answer, I knew the key was to provoke some kind of emotional reaction in order to make it easier to weave my own narrative.

Positive or negative, as long as he reacted in some way—it didn't matter.

My attempt at deflecting, however, didn't land as smoothly as I'd hoped.

The man doubled down immediately, his question slicing through any pretence with surgical precision. "To put it more bluntly, then: Why were Fulkrum's security forces taking some serious potshots at you on the 33rd floor?"

His voice was as even as a calm sea, but his demeanour was anything but welcoming.

Right then, I knew I was in deep water with someone who wasn't just good at his job—he was probably an expert.

'Great, what the fuck's my next move here?'

Panic briefly flickered through my thoughts, highlighting the stark reality that my novice level in [Deception] was no match for someone seasoned in cutting through layers of bullshit.

Coming clean about the data-shard heist from Fulkrum Industries wasn't an option unless I was keen on digging my own grave, especially if this guy was on their payroll, hunting for clues about the breach.

"I kinda rubbed some alleyway folks the wrong way, that's all. Why security felt the need to start shooting, beats me," I said, trying to paint the incident as a misunderstanding rather than the corporate espionage escapade it was. "Those guys? Looked more like Operators than corporate goons. Didn't catch a glimpse of any Fulkrum badges on them; not that they really cared to show them in the first place."

If he was privy to the shootout, then he likely knew about the scuffle that led up to it.

My goal? Keep steering clear of any confession related to the data-shard.

'Just play it cool, don't give anything away about the shard, and maybe, just maybe, I can navigate through this absolute fucking minefield.'

"Did you have company?" He didn't waste any time with his next question.

I gave him the once-over, trying to crack his poker face for any sliver of insight. But the guy was a fortress—his expression and posture gave away absolutely *nothing*.

That scruffy leather cloak he wore like a second skin only made him more of an enigma, effectively masking any physical cues that could hint at his true intentions.

'What's his play here? Trying to sniff out if I had backup, or is he digging for dirt on Aki?' I wondered, my brain spinning scenarios faster than a conspiracy theorist. This whole situation was quickly shaping up to be more intense than any spy drama I'd ever watched.

Mentally, I decided to keep Aki's name out of it unless he specifically mentioned her.

Despite the whole mess of lies between us, throwing her to the wolves—or this guy, which might be worse—wasn't on my to-do list. *'If he were to capture her and torture her... Then me rescuing her in the first place would've been a big waste of everyone's time; especially mine.'*

"Yeah. Unless you count the random Operators in that alleyway at the start," I tossed back casually, maintaining an air of indifference. Inside, I was practically high-fiving my Edge and Ego Attributes for keeping my outer calm intact.

Then came a pause, thick with anticipation, like the quiet before a storm. It felt as if we were both waiting for the other to make a move, the air charged with unspoken tension.

He broke the silence with yet another pointed question. "If it was just you, how come everyone I asked about this incident swears they saw *two* individuals making a beeline for the elevators, dodging guards?"

I let out a long, frustrated sigh, thick with irritation. "Look, I don't have a fucking clue, alright?! Guards were firing left and right; people were scattering like freakin' rats everywhere. The elevators are neutral territory, everyone knows that—they're the one place the corporate goons can't touch you on their own floor. And honestly, trying to avoid getting shot didn't leave much room for people watching, you know? I was a bit fucking busy!"

I leaned into my response, a bit of genuine frustration bleeding into my act, guided by my [Deception]. I hoped my blend of truth and heightened annoyance would be convincing enough.

For the first time, a subtle shift crossed his expression—a slight twitch of his stubbly 3-day beard that might have been the ghost of a smile.

My muscles tightened instinctively, unsure if this was a win or a warning.

Had I just said something that aligned with his mission, or was this smile the precursor to more trouble? Either way, his reaction had me on high alert, second-guessing my every move.

Just as the man began to move for the first time since our standoff started, gearing me up to sprint out of the alley at full throttle, I was jolted by the familiar, broken English of Mr. Shori echoing out from behind me.

"Hey, you! Step away from girl! She with me!" his voice rang out. The rapid patter of his approaching footsteps made it clear he was not just walking, but running towards us.

A mix of regret and deep, genuine gratitude surged through me.

I had deliberately kept our conversation away from Mr. Shori's stall, hoping to shield him from any potential fallout and violence, especially if these guys didn't know about our connection.

The last thing I wanted was to drag him into this mess.

But there he was, defying my intentions by charging into the fray himself.

As he stood beside me, I couldn't hide my shock at seeing him armed, not with one, but two long, razor-sharp knives—the very ones I had recently enhanced with my [Sharpen] Perk. These weren't your average kitchen tools but specialised blades for slicing through rare, delicate ingredients that required long, precise cuts. He had rarely used them before in my presence, but they looked every bit as menacing as you would imagine.

'*Holy shit,*' slipped through my thoughts as I observed Mr. Shori.

It wasn't just the way he held the knives; it was the confidence and skill in his grip, revealing a side of him I hadn't fully appreciated before. This wasn't just a man who wielded knives to julienne veggies but someone who seemed to have a whole other level of expertise, one that went far beyond the culinary arts. My [Knives] Skill tingled, recognizing the seasoned ease and expert grip in his movements—this was muscle memory that had *nothing* to do with food prep.

Raising his hands in a peaceful gesture, much like he had when we first met minutes earlier, the man quickly sought to reassure Mr. Shori. "No worries, Mr. Shori. My business here is concluded either way. I was just about to leave, so no need to brandish those knives of yours."

He gave me a nod, adding, "I appreciate your candid responses, Miss Ela. I doubt I will be in touch, but I wish you all the best either way."

With those final words, he turned and began to walk away, leaving the scene as abruptly as he had entered it.

Half of me burned to chase after him, demanding answers, while the other half was reeling, trying to piece together the surreal encounter.

'He knew Mr. Shori too...?'

"You okay, Ela?" Mr. Shori's voice, thick with concern, snapped me back to reality. "I see you approach, then gone! I figure, 'Ela in trouble!' So I come for help. You not hurt, yes?"

Looking at him, every bit the protector with his earnest, worried expression, a swell of gratitude washed over me.

"I'm fine, thank you, Mr. Shori," I assured him.

Despite the whirlwind of emotions and confusion, I didn't feel like I had been in any immediate danger—perhaps naively so.

"Ehh... I think we should return to the stall, before the customers riot," I suggested, eager to leave the alley and its unnerving shadows behind.

Mr. Shori nodded in agreement, and as we headed back, the curious stares of the customers met us. They had all witnessed Mr. Shori's dramatic exit, long-knives in hand, ready to come to my rescue.

The sight must have been quite something indeed....