

## Chapter 60 - Conclusions

Back under the comforting hum of the food stall, I watched Mr. Shori carefully place his long knives—not back in their usual spot, but closer to his usual workstation, a clear precaution in case today's drama wasn't over just yet.

Turning to me, his concern evident, he asked in Japanese, “{Are you okay, Ela? You're not hurt or anything?}”

Embarrassed yet deeply touched by his concern, I responded, “{Yeah, I'm fine, Mr. Shori. Thank you. It was just a strange encounter. The guy had questions about what happened a couple days ago; about the day when Aki came back here hurt.}”

Mr. Shori's brow furrowed as he processed this. “{He was aware of that...? That's problematic. What exactly did you do to catch this much attention? You're still young, Ela. You shouldn't be getting involved in dangerous things like this...}” His voice carried a weight that suggested he wasn't just concerned—he seemed to be speaking from a place of personal experience.

Part of me was itching to ask Mr. Shori about his past, especially after seeing him so ready to dive into action and wield those long knives with such non-culinary expertise. Yet, I hesitated, respecting the boundaries he seemed to set around his personal history.

After all, he'd shown me the same respect, particularly concerning the recent data-collection mess; despite both a hurt Aki showing up at his stall and this whole incident just now—Mr. Shori still hadn't asked me about any of it a single time.

“{Thank you again, Mr. Shori. I didn't want to drag you into this, but I'm really grateful for your help,}” I said, giving him a deep bow to emphasise my gratitude and perhaps to close that chapter for the time being. A normal day at the stall seemed like the perfect antidote to the morning's adrenaline.

“{Don't mention it. The old are meant to protect the young; such is the way of a healthy world,}” he replied, his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes—the usual look of gentle wisdom that he used to wear, which always reassured me.

Switching back to English, perhaps signalling an end to our deeper exchange, he briskly added, “Now, more work; less talk! You sharpen, you cut, you make broth. Later, I show you more cooking. Yes?” His tone, firm yet affectionate, nudged us back to the rhythm of our daily tasks.

Nodding affirmatively, I felt the comforting familiarity of the kitchen space envelope me.

Mr. Shori returned to the front of the stall, greeted by the curious glances of the customers. They were clearly buzzing with questions about the morning's events, but Mr. Shori wasn't about to offer any explanations.

For me, it was back to the grind, chopping and stirring, but my mind was still racing, replaying the morning's confrontation. I needed to piece together who that man was, who he worked for, and what he had *really* wanted from me...

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*'It's unlikely that he was from Falkum Industries,'* I ultimately concluded, while depositing another slew of algae in the broth-bath, around an hour later. *'If he had been, I doubt he would have been courteous enough to ask me questions in an alley, rather than simply taking me with him and interrogating me in some corporate backroom...'*

Based on everything I knew about corporations, their secrets and how they handled data-breaches in this world from the playthroughs of Neon Dragons I had seen, it didn't seem likely that an Agent of Falkum Industries would play as nice as that.

It wasn't exactly like there were any laws to stop corporations from abducting random citizens and torturing them for information, after all.

Well... technically there were laws; but there was simply no one to actually enforce them—which ultimately meant that the laws didn't matter.

Especially in a megabuilding like Delta, you were hard-pressed to find any real form of justice, but whatever each individual Corporation or Gang of the floor you were currently on would offer.

Actual police didn't enter megabuildings unless an outside investigation required it; or they were practically guaranteed to make a big haul—say, they had concrete, irrefutable proof and evidence of a Corporation's illegal activities and could make use of that.

Mulling over these bits and pieces left a nagging question swirling in my mind, one I couldn't shake off no matter how hard I tried.

*'If he wasn't an agent from Falkum Industries, then who the fuck was he...?'*

It was a puzzle that kept pulling at me, adding an ever-present edge to my thoughts throughout the morning.

I had toyed with the idea that maybe he was an Operator from the crew I had clashed with in the alley, but this guy had seemed leagues above them in capability.

He could have been some sort of mentor to them, sure, but his almost non-threatening attitude—abrupt appearance and sub-text notwithstanding—and the fact that he had barely asked about the alley encounter at all pretty much tossed that theory out the window.

*'Then who else would care about this mess? It was just Falkum Industries, those Operators, and me involved,'* I ruminated, frustration mounting as I tried to untangle the motives behind his interest. *'And it's not like Mr. Stirling would have someone sniff around; I was upfront with him about everything after I ended up at his place looking like I'd gone a few rounds with a lawnmower—and some more than angry guns.'*

As I threw a handful of spices into the mortar, my movements were a bit more vigorous than necessary—the problem was gnawing at me, cranking up my frustration levels. I ground the spices with more force than usual, the rhythmic pounding mirroring the racing of my thoughts.

Sure, maybe I was getting more worked up than I should, but when potential life-threatening implications were at stake if the wrong people took an interest, maybe a little anxiety was justified after all.

As I methodically ground the spices into a fine powder, preparing to blend them into the algae-broth, my mind wandered back to the first time Aki had shown up at the stall. We had spent hours together, just grinding spices, lost in our own little world.

*'I still can't wrap my head around the fact that Aki was supposedly deceiving me all along... There had to be a reason, right? But why? It's not like I'm some big player in this world or anything—why follow me—'*

Mid-grind, I froze, a sudden realisation hitting me like a bolt of lightning.

*'Aki! She was there, in the alley!'* It dawned on me that I had completely overlooked her in my earlier rundown of "relevant parties." She hadn't been relevant until the end and hadn't seemed directly involved in the whole data-shard incident as a whole, which is why she had slipped my mind until now.

My heart kicked up its pace, adrenaline flooding through me as the pieces started to click into place.

*'That man must have been here because of Aki; it's the only thing that makes sense. He wasn't just asking about the alley brawl; he was probing why I had been targeted by gunfire. He didn't care about the data or the shard itself; instead, he focused on whether I had been alone—and when I said I had been, he smiled like that because he **knew** Aki had been there with me...!'*

The puzzle pieces were falling into place now; making me more and more confident in my conclusion: Whoever that man had been, he was somehow connected to "Aki" and had likely attempted to figure out how she had gotten injured like that.

Continuing to crush the spices, both in order to continue my actual work, as well as try to work the adrenaline out of my system, there were still a few unanswered questions that now loomed larger than ever in my mind.

Primarily the question as to why Aki had been sent to follow me to begin with.

As I mixed the freshly ground spices into the broth, my mind wandered through the limited number of interactions I'd had in this world.

*'Who actually knows I even **exist** to begin with?'*

The mental list wasn't long.

The obvious names popped up first: Mr. Shori, Mr. Stirling, and the various shop clerks like Misha whom I'd bought stuff from. But beyond that, compiling a comprehensive list was turning into a bit of a challenge.

*'Then there was that one woman who flipped me off in front of the elevator on my first day out of the apartment—though I seriously doubt she's involved in any of this,'* I mused while moving over to the knives to start sharpening them with my Perk.

And Dr. Maltrick, with her strong preference for staying out of trouble, didn't seem like a likely candidate either.

*'Besides, she knows Valeria. If she wanted dirt on me, she could just ask her directly,'* I reasoned, dismissing her as a possibility.

Recalling the order of my encounters, the unenthused elevator lady was first, then Mr. Shori followed by Mr. Stirling, Dr. Maltrick and finally Misha.

I quickly ruled out the various store clerks and the hairdressers at Circuit Locks—they seemed too entrenched in their day-to-day jobs to be involved in any shady business.

I included Misha, however, not because she was a clerk, but because she was a Gryplik, specifically. Associating with her could attract unwanted attention, given the somewhat rampant racism in this world; depending on where you went.

*'Could that connection have somehow drawn eyes my way?'* I pondered, beginning to sharpen the knives I hadn't gotten around to at the start of my shift and sorting through potential leads, no matter how thin they might be.

As I mulled over the list of everyone I'd interacted with, none seemed particularly suspicious.

Mr. Shori was definitely off the hook, and so was Mr. Stirling—neither one of them would have any trouble getting information on me directly. Dr. Maltrick appeared more likely to avoid drama than dive into it, and if my interactions with Misha were problematic, surely Aki or the mysterious guy who'd approached me would've dropped some hint about Gryplik being a problem as a whole. With a confident nod to myself, I ruled them all out.

Logically, none of them fit into whatever mess was surrounding Aki.

Continuing my mental recap of my activities in this world, a significant incident I'd almost glossed over came rushing back.

"The data delivery," I whispered under my breath as another piece seemed to click into place.

That was the one time I had really exposed myself to *any* faction, notably to the Clawed Beasts.

*'That Vega guy... he seemed like the type who'd keep an eye on someone like me,'* I mused, perhaps influenced by hindsight bias but increasingly convinced I was onto something.

The peculiar contact I had dealt with inside the Downpour bar was starting to look like a prime suspect.

What if Aki had been planted by him? The thought gathered momentum in my mind.

*'Was she sent to monitor me and Mr. Shori, to ensure that Shori didn't revert to his old ties with the Red Snakes or that I didn't inadvertently play into some double-cross involving intel delivery?'*

The theory was gaining more and more weight, the closer I examined everything that had happened so far, lining up the dots between Aki's sudden presence, her shadowing me, and that enigmatic man's questioning.

*'If Vega saw Aki come back hurt, he'd definitely want to know what went down, especially if she was too messed up to fill him in herself.'*

Aki had been in pretty bad shape last I saw her, having lost a lot of blood, so it wasn't hard to imagine her being unable to give a clear account of the events whenever she arrived back at the Clawed Beasts' area; assuming she was part of the gang .

Despite everything—her lies and all—I still found myself hoping she hadn't suffered too much because of any involvement with me. She was just a teenager, and the thought of her being seriously harmed, or worse, because of a situation I'd dragged her into, was unsettling. *'If something really bad happened to her because of me, I don't know how I'd handle that...'*

Memories of the [Murder] Notification flashed before my eyes, making my blood run cold.

*'Stop it, Sera! Aki's okay,'* I told myself firmly, trying to stave off the panic rising in my chest. *'It was one of those thugs, not Aki. People don't just die from a punctured hand... not that quickly, at least.'* This self-assurance was more of a plea, a desperate hope that she was alright, as I worked to calm my racing heart and focus on the facts, not the fears.

As I placed the freshly sharpened knives back on their rack, I tried to lighten the mood in my head with a bit of humour.

*'If having a racing heart gave experience points, I'd have levelled up big time this morning so far.'* Unfortunately, the joke fell flat even in my own mind, doing little to ease the tension I felt.

With a mental sigh, I ran through the whole scenario that seemed most plausible to me now once again.

*'Aki is likely somehow tied to the Clawed Beasts, sent by Vega—or maybe his superiors—to keep tabs on Mr. Shori and possibly on me as well. They probably figured that Mr. Shori, who seems known for his soft spot for teenagers like me, wouldn't suspect a thing. And they were counting on her being young and inconspicuous enough to fly under the radar with me, too.'*

Thinking about how well they seemed to have played their cards, using Aki's youth and likely my own vulnerabilities and need to find a connection in this world against me, left a sour taste in my mouth.

*'They really nailed it, didn't they?' I mused bitterly. 'They knew **exactly** how to play me. Damn it...!'*

The realisation stung and acknowledging that I had been so transparent in their strategy only added to the frustration simmering within me.

Despite my frustrations, I found a slice of inner peace in having cobbled together a coherent explanation for the recent chaotic events.

Realising that Aki might have been planted by the Clawed Beasts to spy on Mr. Shori and me added a layer of complexity to my experience here, but it also offered a valuable learning opportunity.

I had let my guard down after mingling with one of the megabuilding's factions, and it had nearly cost me my life. This outcome, while highly likely unintended by their actions, had been the ultimate consequence nonetheless.

*'I've got to keep my eyes wide open if I mingle with any factions again, even briefly. Can't let my guard slip like that again,'* I resolved, mentally bookmarking this lesson for the future.

With the immediate mystery somewhat resolved, I decided it was time to dive back into work, eager to test if I could leverage my newfound System insights for some extra experience gains.

My path might be steering towards becoming an Operator, but that didn't mean I was going to stop squeezing every drop of experience from my other activities.

After all, who knows? Maybe [Cooking] could prove useful down the line in ways I hadn't yet imagined...

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The rest of my shift at Mr. Shori's unfolded pretty much as usual, except I found myself pausing more often than normal, deliberating over each action a little more carefully.

I was trying to apply the system research I'd done a few days ago, which turned out to be more mentally taxing than I'd expected.

Earlier that morning, tweaking my workout to ramp up the challenge and milk some extra experience points had been straightforward. But with [Cooking], given the diverse range of tasks I juggled from one minute to the next, integrating this new approach into my routine proved tricky.

So there I was, mentally juggling ways to subtly crank up the difficulty of each task as I performed them, completely absorbed. I didn't even notice someone had slipped into the back of the stall until they hesitantly spoke up.

"E...Ela..."

The voice nearly sent me jumping out of my skin. In an instant reflex, I whipped around, kitchen knife in hand, ready to confront whoever had caught me off guard.

But as my eyes landed on the figure before me, my heart stopped for a beat.

"Aki," I blurted out, my voice twisting strangely with a cocktail of emotions.

Seeing her there, unharmed and upright, brought a wave of relief crashing over me. Yet, tangled up with that relief was a thoroughly complex web of distrust, frustration, and annoyance, fueled by the conclusions I'd drawn earlier.

Here she was, the person at the centre of all my recent turmoil, and now, faced with her in person, my feelings were anything but simple.

"I... I'm not here to cause trouble, I promise," Aki began, her voice sounding unusually timid and fragile. "I just wanted to keep my promise to Mr. Shori and come back... and to thank you for saving me. You... You didn't have to, but you did. Especially after everything..." Her voice faltered, struggling to find the right words.

As she spoke, my focus was continuously off.

My Intuition seemed to be tugging my attention towards the backdoor of the stall, hinting I was missing something crucial. Despite trying to focus on Aki, my eyes kept darting back and forth between her and the door.

Noticing my unfocused glances, Aki suddenly looked paler, quickly raising her hands in a calming gesture, "Ahhh, that's just two of my sisters! They wanted to make sure I wasn't in any danger! They... They won't cause any problems!"

She seemed genuinely scared, but I barely registered her fear.

Learning that others were nearby actually reassured me, as it removed the guesswork about whether she was alone; this allowed me to redirect my full attention back to her.

I noticed how she was wearing a cast of some kind on one of her arms and that she was standing fairly unevenly, as if one of her legs had been seriously hurt. Her pallor was worse than I remembered from the last time I had seen her inside Mr. Shori's stall as well.

All those observations however, didn't do anything to calm the raging storm within me.

Finally, my seriously tested patience over the past days finally wore thin.

The need to address the elephant in the room overpowered me.

"What is your name? It's clearly not 'Aki'. I'm sick and tired of thinking of you in quotes. If you want to thank me for bailing you out of the fucking mess you caused, start with being honest about who the actual fuck you are," I demanded, the words far sharper and a lot more confrontational than I had intended.

Despite being surprised at my own bluntness, however, I didn't feel any remorse.

After all the stress and confusion she'd caused me, I had every right to cut through the pleasantries and demand straight answers. No more diplomatic niceties; it was time for some real talk and some actual answers.

A tense silence hung in the air between us, thick with the weight of unspoken thoughts. I watched as a storm of emotions flickered across the girl's face, betraying her inner turmoil.

Finally, she spoke up, her voice barely above a whisper, as if sharing a secret meant only for the two of us.

"My name is Jade... Or rather, that's what everyone calls me. I don't remember any other name," she confessed, the words seeming to carry more weight than they should.

"I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I caused, for messing up your operation... It wasn't what I intended. I was just trying to understand what you were up to and ended up in the hands of those Operators... Thank you for not just leaving me there. You could have, and maybe you should have... After everything..."

Her voice trailed off again, leaving me to fill in the blanks.

Unfortunately for her, however, my patience for filling in those holes was already long spent.

"After everything, *what?* Come on, Jade, spell it out for me, just this once. I want to hear it directly from you," I pressed, my tone sharper and colder than intended, the name 'Jade' almost a snarl.

My frustration was boiling over, no longer interested in holding back or moderating my emotions. "Tell me about how you've been deceiving Mr. Shori and me. How you've been lurking around, pretending to work here just to spy on us. How you've been reporting back to the Clawed Beasts and Vega about our every move. Go on, don't hold back, Jade. Lay it all out!"

Suddenly, the door behind Jade burst open, and two women burst through.

One looked to be about three or four years older than me, while the other seemed to be in her mid-twenties. The younger one was brandishing something that looked like a Wakizashi at me, but it was the older one who really caught my attention.

She wasn't wielding any visible weapon, yet her presence was overwhelmingly intimidating. Her gaze alone felt like being squeezed by a hydraulic press—the intensity of her stare packed with silent warnings that hit me like a physical force.

Somehow, I managed to stand my ground, bolstered by a surge of resolve from my boosted Ego Attribute, as the two women stormed into the back of the stall.

"Sapphira, Ruby, wait!" Jade's voice cut through the cramped back-room as she called out to them.

The two women halted immediately, pausing just a few steps behind her; their eyes never leaving me for a single moment...