

Chapter 52 - Arkion Dojo

By the time my appointment at the Dojo rolled around, I had, more or less, successfully completed my triple-threat grind for experience.

My hands were cramping up, like claw-gripping a controller for fighting games for far too long, due to the whole [Tailoring] business, but the gains I had made were nothing to sneeze at.

Pulling up the condensed list of notifications for my grind, I couldn't help but smile as I put away the freshly cleaned pots from my [Medicine] training.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Medicine] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Singing] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Tailoring] Skill.

'So... I definitely get more experience if I increase the amount I make at the same time... I wonder if that's a quantitative bonus, or simply because making more at once is technically more challenging?' I wondered, pondering over the system's experience calculation mechanics anew. '[Tailoring] is going to take forever to level at my current rate though. I really hope the 1st-level knowledge download is going to help me out big time here...'

As I headed for mine and Gabriel's shared room to prepare for my trip to the dojo, I was abruptly startled by a message. Seeing the name of the sender, I immediately opened it, anxiety spreading throughout my body, fearing I had messed up with the times.

[An outfit for your appointment has been prepared in your wardrobe, daughter. Make sure not to disappoint.]

Breathing a sigh of relief, that it was simply an informational message and not the feared "your teacher called and asked why you aren't in school" talk, I quickly continued on my way towards my wardrobe.

"When did she even do this...?" I couldn't help but mutter aloud, as Valeria hadn't been home in close to a week, from what I could tell. Inside my wardrobe I found a basic, but clearly good quality robe of some sort. It looked somewhat akin to Gi's that I knew from my previous life, often used in Judo and similar martial arts, but it was decidedly less baggy, hugging the body a lot closer and offering less for an opponent to grab onto.

Slipping into it, I once again realised that I had filled out quite nicely, compared to the first day I had been in this world. My legs, arms, butt and chest were being hugged tightly by the almost silk-like texture of the robe, which was reaffirming to see.

When I had ended up being isekai'd into Sera's body, I had secretly been dreading that it would take me months or even years to get to a more normal state, but thanks to the System's cheat-like bullshit, that thankfully had not been the case.

Eyeing myself in the mirror, the sight was unexpectedly pleasing. It was an unfamiliar sense of pride mixed with a strange feeling of disconnection. The reflection seemed almost alien to me, making me double-take to ensure the person in the mirror was indeed me.

The sleek, grey robe only deepened this sense of alienation, marking a stark contrast to my previous life's wardrobe choices, which were dictated by a desire to conceal rather than accentuate.

Noticing a small embroidered logo on the robe, it hit me that it was an Ether Labs item.

'Makes sense,' I thought, considering the limited knowledge I had about the Arkion Dojo. *'Given it's located on a restricted Ether Labs floor, it stands to reason most, if not all attendees, are linked to Ether Labs in one way or another. Curious if I'll meet anyone my age there...? Maybe we can compare parents and see if Valeria is just insane or if that's quite normal around here.'*

With those thoughts swirling in my head, I left the apartment behind and headed for the special elevators that would whisk me up to the 72nd floor.

It was a journey to the highest point I'd ever reached in the megabuilding, a fact that underscored just how serious I needed to take these upcoming dojo sessions.

The higher floors were synonymous with luxury and exclusivity, a direct indication that every moment spent there needed to count. Valeria's emphasis on making sure Gabriel and I excelled in this environment made perfect sense in this context.

Despite my numerous prior efforts, Valeria's exact role within Ether Labs had remained a mystery to me so far, but one thing was imminently apparent: Securing our spots in this training was undoubtedly no small feat on her part. In both my past life and this one, it was a universal truth that nothing valuable came without cost or compromise.

As I keyed in my request for the 72nd floor, I was taken aback by how the scan to verify my access seemed to drag on for more than just a moment.

'Looks like they've ramped up the security for this level,' I mused, a twinge of nerves kicking in as I waited for the elevator's green light on my entry.

A bit longer than expected, but soon enough, the elevator dinged in approval, its doors sliding shut to whisk me upwards. The journey was swift, bypassing all other stops with the efficiency of these restricted elevators, contrasting starkly with the regular ones crammed with daily hustle.

When the doors slid open again, releasing their gentle whoosh into the silence, I was momentarily stunned by the sight that greeted me. Gathering myself briefly and stepping out into the hallway of the 72nd floor, my eyes were immediately captured by a massive 3D hologram of the Ether Labs logo, pulsating gently in the air ahead.

The hallway itself felt like stepping into a scene from a sci-fi epic, with sleek white and grey walls and flooring crafted from an unknown material that shimmered slightly underfoot, giving off an aura of exclusivity and advanced technology.

The ceiling was dotted with lighting fixtures that provided a soft, almost natural light, enhancing the futuristic look of the surroundings.

As I moved forward, the walls revealed an array of terminals and displays, all embedded seamlessly into the material. These screens cycled through pharmaceutical advertisements showcasing the latest in Ether Labs' innovations, alongside interactive maps and directories for the floor's various shops and services.

Approaching one of the terminals, I couldn't help but feel a mix of awe and intimidation.

The high-tech vibe was thoroughly completed with each terminal featuring touchless interaction, responding to gestures and movements rather than physical contact. The sheer expense and sophistication of everything around me was a stark reminder of how far removed this world was from anything I had known before.

As I interacted with the terminal, trying to find my way to the dojo, the realisation of stepping into this thoroughly unknown and high-stakes environment weighed heavily on me, magnifying both my excitement for what was to come and my apprehension about whether I was truly prepared for it. *'Surely, they will know it's my first time at a dojo, right...? They won't expect completely impossible things from me?'*

The terminal efficiently guided me to the Arkion Dojo, interfacing directly with my optical implants to overlay a 3D arrow guiding my path, reminiscent of AR glasses from the world I once knew.

"Well, here we go," I whispered under my breath, embarking down the hallway.

The moment I had set foot on this floor, I had felt like a fish out of water, but that sensation intensified tenfold when I turned around a corner, leading towards one of the shops and encountered other visitors of the floor. At that moment, I found myself wishing the System had a "vanish into thin air" feature for moments just like this.

Ahead of me, everyone was adorned in clothing that screamed opulence and exclusivity, far beyond the simple grey dojo robe I was wearing. My outfit felt rudimentary in comparison, almost like a child's costume at a gala event.

The cybernetics and bionic enhancements on display, however, were even more intimidating.

One individual caught my eye, their left arm replaced entirely by a sleek, metallic prosthetic that moved with such fluidity it seemed more alive than mechanical. The metal was inlaid with intricate patterns that glowed softly, looking more ornamental than functional, suggesting not just raw utility but also a wealth of personal expression.

Another passerby sported bionic eyes that flickered with internal lights, scanning their surroundings with a precision that felt downright invasive. These ocular enhancements were framed by delicate metal filigree that traced their temples, giving them a straight-up otherworldly appearance.

Watching them look around the floor and scanning the items through the shop's window was absolutely mesmerising, as the pupils seemed to dilate at incredible speeds and to impossible degrees, the function thereof a complete mystery to me.

The most striking, however, was a figure with two additional, slender mechanical arms extending from their back.

Each arm was very clearly a masterpiece of engineering, capable of delicate, precise movements that didn't just mimic, but elevate upon the natural motion of human limbs. The appendages were tipped with various tools, seamlessly integrating technology with the body in a display of wealth and sophistication that made my simple dojo attire seem all the more out of place.

I simply watched in awe as the additional arms were continuously working on some kind of square-shaped object that was similarly attached to the individual's back.

Surrounded by individuals who bore the marks of high society not just in their attire but in the very fabric of their bodies, I couldn't help but feel dwarfed by the magnificence and sheer value of their enhancements. Each cybernetic enhancement or bionic addition I witnessed was likely worth more than our entire apartment, underscoring the chasm between our worlds.

As I tiptoed down the pristine, futuristic hallway, I couldn't help but marvel at how Valeria had managed to secure access for Gabe and me to such an exclusive level.

Every step I took was measured, aiming to keep as low a profile as possible.

Engaging with any of these high-society folks was the last thing on my mind; the fear of unknowingly stepping on toes, metaphorically speaking, was too real, given my lack of knowledge about Valeria's connections. I dreaded the thought of accidentally offending someone important, potentially sparking another unexpected ordeal like the one involving Mr. Stirling.

The journey to the dojo was uneventful, thankfully, as I wove my way past an array of cutting-edge boutiques and storefronts bustling with well-dressed patrons. Thankfully, none of them seemed to notice or care about my presence, allowing me to proceed unnoticed.

Reaching the dojo felt surreal.

Standing before its entrance, the building blended seamlessly with its high-end neighbours, save for its opaque, windowless exterior. The front was instead dominated by a sleek, metal facade, illuminated by orange and blue neon lights that elegantly spelled out "Arkion."

This understated marker was the only clue to the nature of the establishment behind it, setting it apart from the glass-fronted luxury stores around it.

Taking a deep breath to muster my courage, I whispered to myself, "Okay, Sera, let's do this."

The flutter of nerves was palpable in my chest, not just from the anticipation but also from stepping so far out of my comfort zone. While I was the one that had required this training on one hand; actually setting foot in this high-tech, elite domain was quite another.

I approached the door with hesitant steps, half expecting some grand, intimidating barrier.

Instead, I found myself facing a scanner similar to the ones guarding the restricted elevators.

It scanned me quickly, and with a reassuring beep, confirmed my access; something that definitely eased my anxiety somewhat. The door slid open, disappearing into the wall with a sleek movement that felt almost too quiet, revealing the dojo's entrance to me.

Stepping through the threshold, I hurried inside, not wanting to hold up the door or stand around outside the entrance for extended periods of time and make myself look weird to passersby. Once inside, I paused for a moment, allowing myself to fully take in my new surroundings.

The spaciousness of the room was the first thing that caught me off guard.

It was elegantly laid out, with display cases strategically placed around the perimeter, showcasing an array of martial arts equipment and clothing. Each piece seemed to tell its own story, ranging from high-tech staffs that buzzed with silent energy to ornamental swords that gleamed under the carefully positioned lighting. Among these, pieces of clothing draped gracefully, some appearing so ancient and delicate, it felt as if a breath could turn them to dust.

The room was also adorned with numerous displays of awards and trophies, each a testament to the prowess and achievements of the dojo's members. These gleaming tokens of victory and excellence were meticulously arranged, catching the light in a way that made them shimmer invitingly. I couldn't help but draw closer, intrigued by the inscriptions and the names, wondering about the stories and the bouts of skill they represented.

After a moment of admiration, my gaze shifted towards the reception desk.

Unlike the high-tech aura that permeated the rest of the room, the desk housed a peculiarly antiquated call button, almost out of place amidst the modernity. With no one immediately visible to assist me, I found myself wandering a bit longer among the articles, each artefact piquing my curiosity further.

The juxtaposition of the ancient and the ultra-modern was truly fascinating, a blend of tradition and innovation that seemed to encapsulate the spirit of what I imagined a cyberpunk dojo to look like down to the tee.

Eventually, my perusal led me back towards the reception desk, however.

The call button, a true anachronism in this setting, drew my attention invitingly. Pausing briefly to ensure I wasn't overlooking an alternative means of summoning assistance, I finally reached out and pressed the button, curious to see who or what would respond to my arrival at this juncture of old world discipline and new world technology.

Hitting the button triggered a surprisingly elegant chime, pretty straightforward yet somehow captivating. A moment of silence hung in the air before a voice, with a distinct twang to it, floated out from a speaker I hadn't noticed before.

"Come on through to the back, Sera. Door's on your right," it directed, carrying an accent that seemed to dance somewhere between the American Midwest and Central Europe.

It was a blend so unique that I was pretty sure I'd never come across anything like it before, but it was decidedly far from unpleasant.

Following the voice's guidance, I strolled over to the door on my right, which welcomed me in with that same hush as the entrance.

Stepping through, my jaw nearly took a dive at the sight before me. The expanse of the room was mind-blowing, challenging the very notion of it being just a "store" within a megabuilding.

I was greeted by an expansive and meticulously organised training area that stretched an impressive 300 metres in length and 200 metres in width. This wasn't just a room; it was a carefully crafted space designed to cater to every aspect of martial training.

The floor was a kaleidoscope of coloured tiles, each hue representing a different section of the training area, segmented yet seamlessly integrated into a cohesive whole. The overhead lighting was exceptional, casting the room in a bright, almost clinical white light that left no corner in shadow, making every participant's movements sharp and easily observable.

The room was divided into six distinct sections, with varying sizes to accommodate different activities. The most striking was the purple section, an enormous area that spanned nearly a third of the room and featured a different type of flooring, whose purpose I couldn't even begin to surmise, designated for what I presumed were the more advanced or group training sessions.

As I stepped further into the room and my feet touched the floor, I noticed that it had a unique springiness to it—a thoughtful detail meant to cushion falls and reduce impact, blending safety with comfort.

Surrounding the perimeter, an impressive array of lockers, display cases, and an eclectic collection of training equipment lined the walls. Some pieces were instantly recognizable, while others were enigmatic, their purpose and application a puzzle.

Each item, no matter how obscure or strange looking, seemed to have its place, contributing to the dojo's aura of comprehensive preparation and advanced training capabilities.

As my gaze shifted from the elaborate equipment and distinct sections of the dojo's backroom, it settled on the dojo's most captivating feature: Its participants.

Due to the room's vastness, a gathering of over two dozen individuals initially seemed sparse. However, this perception was quickly dispelled as I focused on the activities unfolding within.

In the orange section of the room, two figures clad in grey robes were engaged in a sparring match that seemed to defy the laws of physics as I understood them.

With every leap, they soared 2 to 3 metres into the air, their bodies moving with a grace and power that was mesmerising to behold. Each strike, forceful enough to sound like it could pulverise stone, was met with an equally vigorous defence, their feet and hands blurring in a dance of controlled violence.

This was no ordinary training session.

The combatants moved with a fluidity and speed that seemed lifted straight from the most shonen of animes, their actions a blur to my untrained eyes. The room's generous dimensions became a necessity rather than a luxury, as the fighters utilised every inch of space of the orange section, their swift movements carrying them across the floor in swift, powerful bursts.

It was like witnessing the high-level [Martial Arts] builds from Neon Dragons come to life, yet the reality before me dwarfed even those digital fantasies. The game, with its heavy reliance on an arsenal of firearms for combat, often regardless of build chosen, couldn't hold a candle to the sheer physical prowess and lethal grace displayed by the combatants in the orange section. Their movements were a deadly dance, each as potentially fatal as any weapon I had seen in the playthroughs.

"Whoa," slipped out under my breath, almost involuntarily, as another sequence of their high-octane combat erupted before my eyes. The sound of cybernetic limbs and human flesh colliding at breakneck speed echoed throughout the vast room.

"Gets you every time, doesn't it?" an amused voice chimed in beside me, startling me out of my entranced state. It carried a tone that felt eerily familiar, causing me to twitch in surprise.

Standing just a few paces from where I had stopped in my tracks was a woman of average height, around 170cm, who looked as if she'd been there all along, observing the room just as I had been. She wore the dojo's grey robe cinched at the waist, the top half laid over like a casual afterthought, revealing her midriff where her toned abs were displayed with an air of utter nonchalance.

Her olive skin was smooth and seemed to have an inner glow that spoke of years under the disciplined regime of martial arts training.

Her hair was a rich shade of brown, cut short in a style that managed to be both practical and chic, framing her face in a way that accentuated her sharp, discerning eyes. Those eyes were a striking mix of brown and yellow, like a fierce predator's, alert and calculating, suggesting a wealth of experience that likely far exceeded my own.

Despite her relaxed pose, every inch of her conveyed strength and confidence, from the powerful set of her shoulders down to her firmly planted feet.

The sports bra she wore was utilitarian, made for function not fashion, yet it couldn't detract from the imposing presence she commanded. The rest of her upper body was bare, showcasing arms with muscles that were not bulging but carved, the product of perfecting

technique rather than simply lifting weights. This was a body sculpted by years of dedication, not just in the dojo but in every facet of life that demanded the peak physical condition she so clearly possessed.

I immediately recognized that she was not just simply older, more mature than me, she was aeons ahead in terms of experience. If I had to guess her age, I'd place her somewhere between her late thirties and early forties, not just because of the subtle telltale sign of ageing, such as small folds at the corner of her eyes, but also due to the thoroughly mature aura of authority she exuded.

Her appearance was intimidating not just because of her physical prowess, but because it was a manifestation of her skill, discipline, and perhaps, her life's story etched in the form of a martial artist at her peak.

"Don't worry. You'll get there too, Sera. Just follow my lead," she said, a playful edge to her voice that eased some of the tension I felt. The moment her eyes had caught mine lingering on the sculpted landscape of her abdomen, I couldn't help but avert my gaze, the warmth in my cheeks betraying my embarrassment.

The timbre of her voice, now clearly identifiable as the guiding voice from before, grounded me back to the moment.

"Let's go meet the others. Try to keep up," she beckoned with a casual authority, her stride purposeful and brisk yet completely silent. I hurried after her, my curiosity piqued and a little daunted by her assured presence. She was unmistakably a mentor here, and the last thing I wanted was to start off on the wrong foot by bombarding her with questions.

Respect first, that was the rule I knew to follow in such esteemed company.

I shuffled in behind the instructor, whose presence seemed to fill the compact office as much as her absence had defined the spacious training room. The eyes of the three individuals inside flicked towards me, two quickly averting their gaze while the third person's interest lingered a beat longer, their scrutiny almost palpable in the charged air of the room.

Returning the gaze, I took in the varied assembly.

My attention, however, snagged on the one girl that was still scrutinising me as well, whose distinct features gave me a moment's pause.

Protruding from her head were a pair of ears, distinctly vulpine in shape, with a fluidity to their movements that suggested an organic connection to her emotions or senses. They weren't static like a costume; they were real, twitching and swivelling with an almost curious tilt as we acknowledged each other's presence.

'*Are those... fox ears?*' I couldn't help but think to myself, as I was utterly mesmerised by the way they moved completely independently from the rest of her body.

Tearing my gaze from the fox-eared girl, I quickly sized up the other two recruits.

One lad stood out with his cybernetic arms on full display; the sleeves of his robe deliberately shortened to flaunt the intricate, almost artistic, engravings on the metallic limbs. His posture exuded a sense of pride, bordering on bravado, as if his arms were trophies to be admired.

Beside him, a quieter presence emanated from the other boy, who seemed almost unmodified at a casual glance. But as I looked closer, faint lines, like the delicate tracery of bioluminescent tattoos, webbed across his skin, hinting at various bionic upgrades hidden beneath the surface.

In that moment, the dojo's connection to Ether Labs became all the more evident, the blend of martial discipline and cybernetic, bionic and genetic advancements embodied in the very people before me.

And there I stood, in my plain-ass robe, suddenly hyper-aware of how utterly ordinary I was in comparison.

'Well... I'm not quite ordinary. I do have the System to help me out,' I thought to myself, trying to bolster my own mental fortitude. *'But I definitely am missing out on a lot of advantages these guys have, that's for sure...'*

"Line up with the rest, Sera," the instructor's voice suddenly ripped me from my self-indulgent thoughts, jolting me to rush over towards the line and stand ram-rod straight. I wasn't exactly one for military discipline, but something in her voice made me want to fully follow her every order without question.

"My name is Selene Kanis," she announced, her tone firm and expectations crystal clear. "I'm the proprietor and head instructor here. Address me as Sensei, Master, Ma'am or Miss K, nothing else. And don't ever call me Mrs. I'm not that old." Her instructions hung in the air, an unbreachable decree that I mentally underscored, wary of ever crossing her.

"In the Arkion Dojo, your ego is checked at the door," she continued, her tone suddenly like a winter's frost, her words imprinting a deep respect for her role and the space she commanded. "Every one of you starts from the ground here, *no* exceptions. I don't give a single fuck who you are, who your family is or what kind of connections you *think* you have that should matter in here. Cross that line where you think you're more than the person next to you because of who you are outside these halls, and I *assure* you, the bones you risk aren't worth the lesson you'll undoubtedly fail to learn," she said, each word a definitive hammer-strike.

Her warning hung heavy in the air, a tangible reminder that within these walls, it was her rules, her turf, and we were to adapt or face the consequences. I felt a unanimous shiver run through the line; we understood perfectly—'Sensei' was not to be tested.

The sudden shift back to a more genial tone did little to erase the imprint of Miss K's stern warning, but it did offer a semblance of comfort. Even as the timid affirmation of "Yes, Sensei" fluttered from the lips of the fox-eared girl, the rest of us scrambled to echo her, our voices uneven with the remnants of shock.

Selene's demeanour softened slightly, the harsh edge melting away as if it had never been.

"That's better," she said, the more familiar cadence of her accented voice somewhat reassuring. "Here at the Arkion Dojo, your education will span beyond simple physical conditioning. Yes, there will be a relentless regimen of exercise, but *also* intensive mastery in martial arts, leveraging every asset at your disposal—be it the enhancements of cybernetics, the augmentations of bionics, the medicinal gifts of genetics, or the purity of an unaltered human form. Commit to my teachings, abide by the dojo's disciplines, and I'll shape you into true and utter monsters."

Her gaze, alight with an unexpected passion, startled me.

Any preconceptions I had of a veteran instructor, weary from decades of repetition, were quickly dispelled by the vibrancy in her eyes and voice. It was as if she approached our training with the zeal of a mentor embarking on their inaugural mentorship of their very first student.

"Right now you are nothing but scrap. You aren't even ingots yet, for there is too much flux, too much scale and too little carbon in your makeup," Selene proclaimed, her metaphor rich with the language of metallurgy.

I recognized her references thanks to countless hours lost in video rabbit holes of woodworking, smithing and chemistry from my past life, but the analogies seemed to soar over the heads of my fellow initiates. "Before we add that carbon, however, we start at the *foundations* today. I must assess your capabilities, discern your baseline; without knowing what type of metal you are, I can't exactly shape you. We'll move outside for some sparring—to observe, to gauge. After today, your training will diverge tailored to your individual needs. Cybernetics, bionics, genetics—each has its path within my regimen. So, when you see a peer on a different trajectory, *don't* question it. Trust in the program I assign to you; they're crafted with a clear purpose in mind, not merely on a whim, understand?"

A chorus of "Yes, Sensei" followed, all of us having instinctively decided to follow the fox-eared girl's form of address for this lesson, putting an approving smile on Miss K's face.

"Excellent. Time to start—*outside*," she said with zest, her vitality surging as she leaped over the desk with the grace of a trained athlete, reaching the door in a heartbeat.

Her face alight with a mischievous, smug triumph, like a teenager having won at a race that nobody else knew they were a part of, she swung open the door, ushering us once more into the expansive training hall...