

Chapter 27 - Evaluations

To further complement these newfound capabilities in [Programming], my first level in [Netrunning] was an even more monumental addition to my overall skill set.

The first level of [Netrunning] had opened a window into an intricate and expansive world, revealing the multifaceted nature of navigating the Cyberspace in Neon Dragons.

The knowledge I had received from the level-up included an introduction to orienting oneself within the Cyberspace. It was a bizarre blend of the virtual and the physical, where one's ability to move, dodge, or sprint in the cyber world was directly tied to their real-world physical capabilities and Skills. This fusion of digital and physical realities meant that a netrunner's physical fitness could greatly enhance their effectiveness in the virtual space.

The Skill of [Manifestation] was similarly crucial, as it involved creating and manipulating virtual constructs within the three-dimensional Cyberspace itself. These constructs could range from simple tools to complex environments, each serving a specific purpose.

[Programming], as a core component, was just as essential for understanding and crafting the software tools used in the digital exploits that could be used within the Cyberspace. My newfound understanding of code and algorithms from the [Programming] Level 2 knowledge drop was bound to become a backbone of my [Netrunning] prowess going forward.

[Quick-Hacks] was also a big part of what [Netrunning] would entail. It focused on rapid, on-the-fly coding solutions, often necessary in high-pressure scenarios where immediate responses were crucial. This skill required a blend of creativity and technical acumen, leveraging coding knowledge for swift problem-solving.

[Stealth], as one of the first and most important physical-type Skills, in the Cyberspace was about more than just hiding one's physical presence; it was about concealing one's digital footprint, evading detection, and sneaking past virtual defences.

Other physical-type Skills like [Athletics] and [Acrobatics] surprisingly found their relevance in navigating the Cyberspace as well. They were vital for the physical demands of accessing hardware or performing evasive manoeuvres in risky situations.

This first level in [Netrunning] scratched the surface of all these various topics and more, including the basics of cybersecurity in three-dimensional space, the fundamentals of digital espionage, and the rudiments of data extraction and manipulation from digital constructs.

Each topic was a gateway to a deeper understanding of the cybernetic world, hinting at the vast potential and complexities awaiting in the higher levels of the Skill.

As I had delved into these initial parts of the knowledge, I realised the sheer, ludicrous scope of [Netrunning] and quickly learned that it was much, *much* more extensive than I had ever anticipated.

It was a Skill that demanded not just technical expertise but also physical prowess, strategic thinking, and a deep understanding of both the digital and physical worlds. A true

compound-type Skill, that not just relied on, but further expanded on other, pre-existing Skills.

I was undoubtedly going to have to delve into netrunning as a whole, as well as the Skill in the future at some point, but for now, the short foray of excessive knowledge from the first level had been enough for me for a while.

Lying in bed, my chosen sanctuary for diving into the SPG-01 shard's complexities, I tried to soothe the persistent throbbing in my head. As I lay there, eyes closed, focusing on the ebb and flow of my breathing, a sudden notification chimed, pulling me from my reverie. It was a message from Oliver, which I promptly opened, curious about its contents.

The message was brief and straightforward, yet it carried an air of unintended threat:

[Valeria will be home for dinner later today.]

A wave of apprehension washed over me. I wasn't remotely prepared to face Sera's mother under these circumstances.

My days had been consumed with acclimating to this new life and reality, leaving little room for understanding Valeria's character or her dynamics within the family—especially her relationship with Sera. The prospect of interacting with her, given my still shaky grasp on Sera's life and memories, filled me with a mix of dread and uncertainty.

'What does Valeria expect from me? How am I supposed to interact with her?' The questions swirled in my head, adding to the weight of my already strained mental state. The challenges of adapting to this world had been daunting enough; now, the added complexity of navigating familial relationships loomed over me like a daunting shadow.

Our last encounter, what the family's matriarch, had fondly termed a "family dinner," had been nothing short of a masterclass in self-restraint and, without a doubt, the most surreal experience I'd encountered across both my lives combined.

The prospect of facing Valeria again filled me with a sense of unease. I wasn't ready, but the choice wasn't mine to make. The message was clear: Valeria would be joining us for dinner later, and another family gathering was inevitable. This unavoidable truth left me with just a few hours to strategize and prepare as best as I could.

But what exactly was the right preparation? Valuable information about Valeria, which could guide me in formulating an effective approach, was sorely lacking. No handbook or guide existed for navigating a dinner with someone like her, whose scrutinising gaze could be both unnerving and revealing.

Drawing on my past life's experiences, I focused on what might resonate with a career-driven corporate woman like Valeria.

My primary objective had to be to position myself as an asset, not a liability, in her eyes. My approach needed to demonstrate an understanding of her world, aligning with her values and ambitions.

My remarkable recovery and swift progress might earn me some favour in Valeria's eyes, but I was navigating in the dark regarding my predecessor's rapport with her.

What legacy had the original Sera left behind? Was her relationship with Valeria strained or downright disastrous?

Gabriel's scant references to the past hinted at a tumultuous relationship between the original Sera and Valeria, marked by reluctant obedience and frequent clashes that sometimes led to Sera fleeing home.

This history left me questioning whether my recent achievements could outweigh any negative perceptions Valeria might hold due to the original Sera's actions. The hope was that my positive strides could tip the scales in my favour, considering that the original Sera had maintained some connection to the family.

However, I couldn't afford to rely on this hope alone.

To me, Valeria was an enigma—a stranger whose maternal connection to Sera's body I inhabited didn't automatically translate into trust or understanding. In preparing for this dinner, I had to tread cautiously, treating Valeria not just as a family member, but as a potentially influential figure whose assessment could significantly impact my new life.

As I pondered my approach, a strategy began to form. *'Maybe I can leverage my new connections, like my rapport with Mr. Shori and the favour Vega and the Clawed Beasts owe me, to showcase my value,'* I thought.

'And let's not forget the life-saving rescue of Gabriel. That has to count for something in Valeria's eyes, right?' With these thoughts swirling in my head, I rose from the bed.

Determined to make a good impression on the family matriarch, I decided to freshen up with another shower. It was crucial to appear at my best, leaving no stone unturned in ensuring I presented myself in the most favourable light possible to Valeria.

—

Shortly after, Oliver arrived back home, his fatigue palpable from what must have been another gruelling day at work. Our interaction was minimal, each of us preoccupied with our respective concerns—his mind undoubtedly tangled with work-related issues, while I was consumed by thoughts of Valeria and the impending family dinner.

I spent the next hour racking my brain for strategies to impress Valeria, but came up alarmingly short. A few ideas floated around, yet none screamed 'guaranteed success'.

My lack of substantial information about her made it challenging to devise any solid plans. I had contemplated seeking Oliver's insights, but as I emerged from my room to approach him, I could immediately see that it wasn't the right time. Oliver was visibly burdened by his work troubles, and I regretted that I couldn't offer any assistance.

In all honesty, I felt somewhat adrift.

The day had been a triumph in terms of accumulating a significant amount of experience and advancing key Attributes and Skills.

However, the shadow cast by Valeria's expected arrival had swiftly overturned my sense of achievement, replacing it with a sense of impending dread, like the figurative sword of Damocles above my head.

To my surprise, Gabriel came home earlier than expected, arriving just an hour and a half after Oliver. It was definitely a surprise, but a welcome one.

In my mind, I secretly celebrated his early return, '*Gabriel is **exactly** the person I needed to see right now!*'

As he entered, he offered a quick greeting to Oliver, who was still engrossed in his work. Sensing the tense atmosphere, Gabriel wisely gave our father some space and headed straight to our shared room where I was eagerly waiting.

"You're back early," I remarked, watching his silhouette undress behind the metal sheet partitioning our room.

"Yeah... I nearly passed out trying to work too hard, so Mr. Schultze sent me home," he responded with a hint of disappointment, as if he felt he had let someone down. "But it's probably for the best, especially with Mom coming home tonight. It's been a while since I last saw her, and I wouldn't mind catching up, y'know?"

I really didn't "y'know" at all, considering the sheer terror I felt whenever I thought about that woman, but I could understand the sentiment at least. He did just nearly die a couple days ago, after all. That would put anyone into "I'd like to talk to my Mum" mode, I'd imagine.

"Talking about that... I have to admit, Gabe, I'm really nervous about tonight's dinner. I just don't know how to act around Valeria," I confessed, pouring out my concerns. "What does she expect from me? What would she see as progress on my part? And this whole concept of a family dinner, what's her goal with it? I'm at a loss trying to figure her out. If you've got any insights or advice, I could really use it. I've been wracking my brain trying to figure out a strategy, but I'm just... stuck, Gabe," I admitted, laying my worries bare.

I was very much conscious of the ticking clock, unsure of when Valeria would arrive, and knowing that any information Gabriel could provide might necessitate some last-minute adjustments to my plans. Time was indeed of the essence.

Gabriel paused, deep in thought, before finally offering his perspective. "Honestly, Sera, from what I saw last time, you handled Mom pretty well, better than I ever could. You seem more adept at dealing with her than me after your coma..." he began, his tone reflective.

"I'm not exactly sure what Mom's endgame is with these dinners. She's always been... cryptic about her reasons. But she probably has her motives. As for what she expects from you, I think she might want you to follow in her footsteps," Gabriel said, his expression growing more serious.

He then recounted an incident from their past that had caused a significant rift between Valeria and the pre-coma Sera. "There was this one time, Valeria, in her usual commanding way, suggested—well, more like ordered—you to work on your speech and focus on your appearance. She was adamant that you shouldn't tarnish your reputation before even having the chance to use it for your own benefit. Pre-coma Sera didn't take that well. You were in your rebellious phase, and the idea didn't sit well with you at all."

Gabriel shrugged slightly, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. "I think that was Valeria's way of grooming you for a corporate life, or something along those lines. But that's just my guess. Valeria's always been hard to read, even for me. Sorry, Sera. I don't got more than that."

Absorbing Gabriel's insights, I felt a slight easing of my anxiety. A plan began to crystallise in my mind. '*So, Valeria might see me as a potential corporate successor? That's an angle I can work with,*' I thought, strategizing atop my bed.

The idea of diving into the corporate world wasn't exactly thrilling, but if it meant staying on Valeria's good side and keeping myself out of danger, I was ready to play the part. Pretending to be an aspiring corporate figure seemed like a small price to pay for peace.

'In the corporate world, showing weakness is akin to signing your own death warrant. That must be why Valeria is such a bitch; she can't afford to be seen as anything less than ruthless. So, I need to be assertive, yet not overly aggressive. She is, after all, Sera's mother,' I reasoned. The plan was to strike a balance—firm but not overly confrontational.

I braced myself for the evening, now armed with a clearer strategy, all thanks to Gabriel's input. It all boiled down to how well I could perform and, of course, Valeria's mood. With a deep breath, I prepared to face whatever the dinner might bring.

'I've got this,' I reassured myself, feeling a newfound, albeit still very shaky, confidence bubble up from deep within me.

—

An hour later, Gabriel and I, freshly dressed in our ostentatiously upscale attire, were about to make our way to the living room. Valeria had arrived and, with her typical assertiveness, summoned us to the family dinner. This time, she had even brought the food herself.

I was adorned in the same cerulean evening dress as before. It was my sole option, but the difference from last time was striking. No longer confined to a wheelchair, I could stand tall. Moreover, my body now filled out the dress beautifully, transforming me from what had once been akin to a rolling spectre into someone who actually complemented the dress's design. The fabric hugged my newfound, modest curves gracefully.

Looking in the mirror, I couldn't help but appreciate the reflection staring back. It was a long time since I'd felt genuinely pretty. I was no stunner by extravagant standards, but this was a considerable upgrade from both my past life's self and the initial post-coma state of Sera's body.

This newfound confidence was *precisely* the kind of boost I needed to confront Valeria with conviction. I took a moment to savour the empowering feeling before Gabriel finished up his part of the preparations and we stepped into the living room together.

As Gabriel and I entered the dining room, we were greeted by the sight of Oliver and Valeria, already seated and impeccably dressed for the occasion. Unlike us, they wore different attire from our previous family dinner, showcasing their more extensive wardrobe.

Oliver, clad in a sleek black three-piece suit with a perfectly matched tie, exuded a refined charm. The ensemble, reminiscent of something from my past life, suited him exceptionally well. Seated beside Valeria, they presented a picture of elegance and harmony, their outfits seemingly chosen to complement each other—a testament, I suspected, to Valeria's meticulous attention to detail in crafting their public image.

As I approached the table, maintaining my composure required a conscious effort, further being bolstered by my Ego Attribute. Valeria's presence was even more commanding than I remembered, her aura almost tangibly intense.

But it wasn't just her demeanour that caught my attention; it was her appearance.

Dressed to the nines, she radiated a level of high-society elegance and regal poise that was a notch above our last encounter. The level of sophistication she exuded was awe-inspiring, turning the dinner into a showcase of her impeccable taste.

The dress, a deep, sapphire blue, hugged her form gracefully, cascading down to the floor with an elegant fluidity. Its fabric shimmered subtly under the lights, giving off a soft sheen that seemed to change shades with her movements.

It featured a tasteful, plunging neckline that was artfully balanced with long, flowing sleeves, adding a touch of classic elegance to the modern design. The bodice was adorned with intricate beading that caught the light with every turn, creating a mesmerising, almost hypnotising effect.

This exquisite detailing subtly drew attention upwards, enhancing the striking steel-grey of her eyes, which appeared even more piercing against the backdrop of her attire. The way the gown's colour complemented her eyes was no mere coincidence, of course; I knew that it was a deliberate choice that spoke volumes about her meticulous approach to her appearance even for something as relatively mundane as a family dinner.

In contrast to the sharp, businesslike suit she had donned for their last dinner however, tonight's ensemble showcased a different facet of her persona.

Her ebony-black hair, usually styled in a practical, yet chic manner, was transformed.

It was swept up into an elaborate updo, strands artistically woven and pinned to create a structure that was both intricate and effortlessly elegant. The hairstyle added to her regal bearing, lending an air of approachable gracefulness that was less evident in her more formal corporate attire.

The absence of a suit seemed to soften her overall appearance, yet the underlying strength and authority she commanded seemed somehow elevated above even her corporate self that she had presented the last time around.

Approaching the table, I swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the lump in my throat that had invariably formed when I had laid eyes on Sera's mother.

Just moments ago I had thought myself pretty, marvelling at myself in the mirror in my room, but compared to the image of beauty and sophistication that was Valeria, I might as well have been a half-dead hobo in some long forgotten alleyway in Neo Avalis' underbelly.

"Sit," Valeria directed, her voice carrying the familiar blend of abrupt command and a deceptive sweetness that suggested dire consequences for disobedience.

I obliged immediately, attempting to channel as much grace and poise as I could muster, drawing on memories of exaggerated elegance from the k-dramas and TV series of my past life. My effort, though somewhat theatrical and juvenile, was certainly a step above Gabriel's approach.

He dropped into his seat with the finesse of a brick skimming a lake's surface, his lack of decorum unintentionally casting me in a more favourable light by comparison.

'At least his lack of polish makes me seem more refined,' I mused, subtly adjusting my dress upon sitting. *'But I really need to give him a crash course in whatever etiquette I know before our next encounter with Valeria. We can't afford to slip into her disfavour,'* I planned silently, setting a mental note to coach Gabriel on the finer points of conduct in the presence of our daunting matriarch.

Seated opposite Valeria, I consciously mustered all my Ego and determination to maintain eye contact, despite an overwhelming desire to look away. Her gaze was formidable, sending a chill through me that seemed to freeze my blood.

'If her demeanour doesn't end me, this stress surely will,' I mused inwardly.

Yet, bolstered by the firm resolve granted by my Ego Attribute, I held her gaze, feeling its stabilising effect amidst my internal turmoil.

The moment stretched, feeling like an eternity under Valeria's piercing scrutiny, until she broke the silence with a graceful smile. Her voice, embodying the epitome of corporate sophistication, resonated through the room.

"First, I must express my gratitude to both of you for making the effort to join us this evening," she began, her tone effortlessly blending formality with a hint of personal touch.

'As if we had a real choice,' I thought cynically, suspecting that her words were mere formalities, a veneer of courtesy masking an unspoken mandate.

When Valeria moved on to shift her focus directly towards me, however, my muscles instinctively tensed, bracing for her words.

"I have been informed of your remarkable recovery, my daughter," she addressed me directly, her words measured and deliberate. "It is indeed heartening to see you liberated from that rather unsightly wheelchair. This progress is most commendable, and it would be negligent of me to fail to acknowledge its significance."

Her words, while acknowledging my improvement, carried an air of calculated appraisal, as if she were assessing an asset's potentially newfound value.

'That's good! Acknowledgements are good! Breathe, Sera. Breathe,' I consciously reminded myself, taking slow measured breaths, trying to keep my calm under her piercing gaze.

Valeria's next words, however, sent a shockwave of anxiety through me, freezing me in place. "In light of the egregious misdiagnosis you suffered, I have initiated a thorough investigation into the medical practitioners involved on your behalf, daughter," she continued, her tone laced with a controlled, icy resolve.

"The emotional distress their *gross and utter incompetence* has inflicted upon you and our family is intolerable and demands redress. Rest assured, I will *not* let this matter rest, and I fully know that you all concur with my actions on a fundamental level. I will, naturally, keep you informed of the investigation's progress and the inevitable consequences that will befall those responsible for this farce." Her words were as sharp as they were deliberate, painting a clear picture of her intent and the lengths she would go to protect her family's interests.

To me however, her statement felt like a veiled accusation, targeting the inexplicable speed of my recovery from what was essentially a state considered beyond recovery.

I needed to summon every bit of my Ego Attribute, along with the massive dose of fear and anxiety coursing through my veins, which collectively rooted me to my chair. Internally, I was screaming like a banshee, wanting nothing more than to jump up and escape the tension-filled room.

The proposed investigation into the medical team was a minefield of potential discoveries.

In reality, the doctors hadn't misdiagnosed me, after all. They simply hadn't been equipped to foresee someone like me—a living embodiment of an anomaly, a literal walking cheat-code, rendering their otherwise accurate predictions completely off the mark for my case.

If Valeria's investigators were thorough and competent, which I had every reason to believe they would be, it wouldn't take them long to realise that the medical professionals had adhered to all standard procedures. Their prognosis, given my condition at the time, had been perfectly reasonable.

This left me to hope that, perhaps by some cosmic twist of fate, the investigators would stumble upon some random, unrelated incompetencies, potentially steering them clear of the true nature of my miraculous recovery.

Valeria's statement left no doubt about the decisiveness of her intentions regarding the investigation.

There was a commanding certainty in her voice, an unwavering resolve that indicated arguing or attempting to dissuade her would be futile, and likely detrimental to my standing in her eyes. She spoke with the authority and finality characteristic of someone accustomed to her decisions being unchallenged.

As she shifted the conversation away from the investigation, Valeria's words took on a slightly warmer tone, "Moving beyond this unfortunate matter, I wish to express my acknowledgment of your commendable actions in recent days, daughter. Your adept intervention in saving Gabriel's life has not gone unnoticed. It would have been a regrettable loss to our family had you not been able to provide the necessary assistance in that critical moment.

"While I recognize that mere words of gratitude may seem insufficient under these circumstances, it is important for me to convey my genuine appreciation: Thank you, daughter. Losing Gabriel would have been a not-insignificant blow to our family, and your decisive actions in this regard have not only been noted but are deeply appreciated and deserve further recognition."

As Valeria concluded her remarks, she elegantly placed a crimson-coloured shard on the table and gently slid it towards me with a grace and regality that made it seem as if she was bestowing a royal favour.

Despite my Ego Attribute's efforts to maintain my composure, my eyes widened in shock at the recognition of the item before me.

It was a restricted credit shard.

They were akin to prepaid credit cards of my previous world but with several critical distinctions.

Firstly, the credits within the shard were *exclusively* for purchasing goods and could not be used for services or informal direct transfers.

Secondly, and more crucially in this context, the issuer of the shard, in this case, Valeria, would be notified of *any* transactions made with it and would have to explicitly authorise *each* one.

I quickly grasped Valeria's underlying motive: She was presenting me with a credit reward that simultaneously served as a test.

Through my spending choices, she would be able to gauge my potential value to her.

Misusing the credits, in her view, would undoubtedly diminish her estimation of my worth. Yet, the gesture of providing the shard also positioned her as generous and giving to anyone not reading between the lines.

Her strategy was undeniably astute, a brilliant means to swiftly evaluate someone's utility as an asset, and I couldn't help but admire the cleverness of her approach.

I was undoubtedly going to have to seriously consider my purchases carefully, whenever I intended to use the shard...