

Chapter 36 - New Me

As Zeria diligently proceeded with the task at hand, they meticulously reviewed each style from the list they had earmarked earlier. Now, instead of the initial rapid pace, they were taking their time, methodically adjusting each style to align with my preferences using the interactive options and sliders on the mirror.

This slower pace allowed me to genuinely appreciate the potential hairstyles.

Watching the transformation unfold on the mirror's reflection, I was pleasantly surprised by Zeria's keen sense of style. Each look they curated and modified seemed to resonate with my sense of aesthetics.

There were moments when I was almost compelled to immediately settle for one of the styles, feeling an instant connection with "this one" or "that one." However, I restrained myself, curious to see the full range of possibilities that Zeria had in store.

Surprisingly, even when Zeria had modified a style to a point where I thought it looked fantastic, they would often critically assess it and then discard it with a decisive "No, this won't do," sending it to the digital trash can at the bottom left corner of the mirror interface.

Despite my own approval of these styles, I couldn't quite discern what Zeria saw—or didn't see—in them. But I chose to trust Zeria's expertise, their eye for detail that perhaps saw nuances I missed.

After all, they were the professional, and their judgement had so far been impressively on point, if the earmarked styles were anything to go by. So instead, I continued to watch in silence, a mix of excitement and admiration growing within me as Zeria worked their magic, transforming the digital reflection into potential versions of the new me.

Ten minutes into the session, Zeria leaned back in their chair with a contented hum and a pleased smile. "Well, I think *we've* got it. I've *narrowed* it down to three *styles* that should suit you *perfectly*. Now, it's up *to* you to make *the* final call, little lady," they announced.

With a graceful motion of their hands, Zeria brought up the three selected styles on the mirror's screen, arranging them side-by-side for my consideration.

"The first *option* here, on the left, aligns *most* closely with what you described," Zeria began, enlarging the image for a clearer view. "It's a medium *side-swept* style, which can be swept to either the left or right, and *features* a shaved side on the opposite to *complement* any future cybernetics you might opt *for*."

As they toggled between the left and right sweep options, I found myself drawn to the left-sided sweep. There wasn't any specific rationale behind my preference; it just felt right, resonating with me more than its counterpart.

Zeria continued, "For the colour *scheme*, I've selected VoniX-black and Skyless-cyan. They create a striking contrast that's truly *eye-catching*. If it were up to me, I might have thrown in some metallic accents—something like Chromatic-silver or *Steel Wrought-silver*, for an extra

flair. But I *admire* your commitment to the look you *envisioned*," they elaborated with a nod of appreciation for my choices.

Zeria then moved on to present the second style.

"This *next* one is quite the *modern* twist on a classic—a bowl-cut," they explained. "Now, hear *me* out. It allows for easy *shaving* of the sides while the *longer* hair on top forms the 'bowl,' completely *concealing* the shaved areas. It's a style *that* offers both coverage and the *element* of surprise."

They displayed a 3D model of the bowl-cut, showing how the top hair would elegantly drape over, hiding the shaved sides. The stylist added, "With the *VoniX-black* as the primary colour, *the* Skyless-cyan would peek out *enchantingly* from the front, almost like a curtain of colour cascading *around* your face. It's a *statement* look that allows *the* cyan to *shine* when viewed from the *front*."

For the third option, Zeria unveiled something distinctly different.

"This one is a more edgy *asymmetrical* bob," they said. "One side is cut shorter, almost a buzz, while the other side is kept at a *medium* length and swept over. It's a *bold*, modern look that really frames the face *beautifully*."

Zeria highlighted how the asymmetry of the cut provided a striking balance between the boldness of a shaved side and the softness of the longer hair. "With this *style*, both the VoniX-black and *Skyless-cyan* get their moments to *shine*. The black forms the *base* while the cyan adds a *dynamic* edge, visible on the *buzzed* side and as *streaks* through the longer *section*."

Each hairstyle presented by Zeria had its unique charm and appeal, fitting within the specifications I had set but also offering a distinct look and feel. The stylist's expertise in envisaging these styles and explaining their merits made the decision a lot more challenging than expected.

My initial inclination had been towards the side-swept style, but upon seeing the asymmetrical bob, particularly with the dynamic interplay of my chosen colours as described by Zeria, I found myself in a quandary.

The decision was turning out to be much more challenging than I had anticipated.

'It's a close call between the first and the third option,' I thought. *'But would the asymmetrical bob be too daring for me at this stage? And there's a risk of standing out more than I'd like, too.'* The immediate visibility of the cyan in the third style posed a concern.

If someone, like Valeria, were to take issue with it, I would have no way to conceal the striking cyan. Conversely, the side-swept style offered some discretion. The cyan could remain hidden unless someone saw me straight on.

Internally, I was leaning towards the boldness of the asymmetrical bob.

It appealed to my sense of style and the persona I was beginning to embrace in this new world. Yet, I had to weigh this against the practicality of my current circumstances.

With my self-actualization still a work in progress, and considering the Skills and Attributes I possessed to confidently uphold my choice, the distinctiveness of the bob could potentially draw unwanted attention.

It would be far easier to identify someone with a distinctive “abyss-black and cyan bob” than someone with a more subdued “black side-swept style.”

Despite the prevalence of colourful hairstyles in the cyberpunk landscape of Neo Avalis, vibrant hues in hair still stood out as a notable feature, unlike darker or more muted colours that blended more seamlessly with the surroundings and the general populace.

Making a decision that balanced my personal taste with practicality, I leaned towards a safer choice. “I’ll go for the first option, the one with the left-sided sweep. I’m really drawn to the third option too, though. Is there any way you could save it for me, maybe in my client profile or something? I’d love to come back for it in the future,” I suggested, eager to secure both styles—one for my immediate makeover and the other as a future possibility.

Zeria responded with a knowing, sleek grin.

Deftly, they discarded the second option into the digital trash bin on the mirror’s interface and expertly slid the third option into a saved styles folder, accompanied by an encouraging wink.

“Of course, little *lady*. Zeria will keep this bold look *safe* for the day you’re ready to *embrace* it properly. For now, let’s *focus* on giving you the *most* fabulous side-swept style Neo Avalis has ever *witnessed!*” Their enthusiasm was infectious, and I felt a surge of excitement at their promise.

Their gesture of saving the third style felt like a nod to my future self—a self that would, one day, be ready to step into an even bolder identity, free of the shackles of concern and the worries about Valeria’s overbearing presence.

But for now, I was content knowing that the style I chose would be crafted by Zeria’s skilled hands, confident that it would be nothing short of remarkable. As Zeria began their work, I settled back, anticipating the transformation that would mark a significant step in my journey in this new world...

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As Zeria meticulously worked on my hair, time seemed to melt away, leaving me lost in the rhythmic sounds of their tools at work.

The gentle clicks and clacks of scissors and various styling devices were almost hypnotic, lulling me into a serene state. Zeria had thoughtfully turned off the mirror’s display, ensuring that the final reveal of my new hairstyle would be a complete surprise.

Throughout the session, as Zeria's skilled hands manoeuvred across my scalp, I found a sense of comfort and relaxation in the sensation—something I hadn't experienced in a long while.

It had been ages since my last visit to a salon in my previous life, and I had almost forgotten how calming and therapeutic a professional hair treatment could be.

My mind wandered during the process, drifting through thoughts of the past few weeks, snippets of the few, clearer memories from my old life, and contemplations about my future as Sera.

It was a peaceful introspection, a rare moment of quiet in the midst of so much change.

Finally, however, Zeria leaned back, their work complete, and let out a satisfied sigh. “You’re all *done*, little lady. *Ready* to see the *new* you?” their voice pulled me back to reality.

I felt a rush of nervous excitement at the thought of the reveal. My voice seemed to have momentarily deserted me in anticipation, so I simply nodded in response, my heart racing with a mix of eagerness and anxiety for the big reveal.

Zeria seemed to understand the significance of the moment, deliberately taking their time to reactivate the mirror.

The salon had incorporated a dramatic reveal feature into its mirrors, causing the image to gradually materialise from bottom to top. This function, designed to heighten the anticipation of the big reveal, certainly achieved its purpose, though it added to my growing impatience.

As the mirror slowly came to life, revealing my transformed appearance, I found myself momentarily speechless. “Holy shit...” was all that managed to escape my lips.

I had never seen myself as particularly attractive.

Sure, my grandmother had always insisted on my cuteness, but grandmothers are supposed to say such things. Now, confronted with my reflection, sporting the side-swept hairstyle I had always envisioned but never dared to try, I was taken aback.

For perhaps the first time, I genuinely felt *pretty*.

It was a continuation of the transformation I had begun to feel in the dress from the previous day's dinner, but this was more profound, more personal.

Tears welled up as I gazed at my reflection, overwhelmed by the crystallising realisation that who I was observing in the mirror was myself. '*Is that really me...*?' I questioned internally, struggling to reconcile this image with my own self-perception.

Throughout this emotional moment, Zeria remained a comforting presence at my side, silent yet attentive, respecting the intimacy of my reaction. Their professionalism and empathy were evident; they understood the deep impact such transformations could have.

They weren't just hair stylists—they were artisans who played a pivotal role in shaping people's identities and self-expression. In that moment, I was profoundly grateful for Zeria's skill and sensitivity, which had allowed me to see myself in a new, empowering light.

As I composed myself, taking deep, steady breaths, I turned to Zeria with heartfelt gratitude. "Thank you so much. This is perfect. It's everything I wanted and more," I expressed, truly appreciative of their skill and understanding.

Zeria replied with casual confidence, accompanied by their signature wink. "Of *course*. What else *would* you expect from a *professional*?" they quipped. They then proceeded to remove the cape that had shielded me from the fallen hair and swivelled my chair back to face the salon.

To my surprise, Zeria handed me a sleek, black opaque bag.

Seeing my puzzled expression, they quickly clarified, "It's your hair."

My confusion only deepened, prompting them to explain further. "*Natural* hair has its value, you see. Some salons *might* not be so forthcoming and keep it, but here at *Circuit* Locks, we believe in *professionalism* and transparency. We *collect* it as we work and give it to you afterward. *You* should have *complete* control over what *happens* to your natural hair."

This practice was new to me; I had never encountered such a thing in the playthroughs I had watched of Neon Dragons. It likely wasn't a game mechanic but a detail mentioned in some obscure lore item hidden within the game.

"I *need* to inform you that you *have* the option to sell *your* hair to us," Zeria continued, their tone shifting to a more formal, rehearsed speech. "We *use* natural hair for *various* purposes, like natural hair *implants* and specific *cybernetics*. After we *acquire* it, your hair is *processed* anonymously, *with* no link back to *you*. We can offer a discount *on* your *current* service based on the *quality* of your hair or pay *you* in credits."

Zeria's voice was professional, devoid of the earlier warmth, clearly a part of the job they had done countless times before.

I was almost about to immediately agree, but held myself back, as a certain pain-tinged memory came sweeping in. The last time I had acted impulsively, it led to unforeseen complications. The memory of that incident urged extreme caution.

'*Is it really a good idea to give away my hair to people I hardly know?*' I pondered internally, gently weighing the bag in my hands. '*Even though they assure anonymity and no traceability, can I be certain of that fact? Zeria seems trustworthy, but it's unlikely they're directly involved in the hair processing.*'

My thoughts circled around the potential risks and benefits. '*What would be the downside of keeping my hair? Aside from missing out on a discount, which doesn't affect me directly since Valeria is covering the costs, there seems to be no immediate benefit to me.*'

The idea of converting my hair into credits, however, presented a tantalising opportunity. It was a way to extract some value from the Restricted Shard indirectly.

I decided it was best to gather more information before making a final decision.
'*Understanding the actual value of my hair would certainly help in deciding,*' I concluded.

Turning to Zeria, I asked, "Could you tell me how much my hair would be valued at if I chose to have it paid out in credits instead of a discount?" My tone was inquisitive but cautious. I was learning the importance of prudence in this new world, taking each step with a bit more consideration than before.

Zeria paused thoughtfully before responding, "Given the *superior* quality of your hair, *which* is notably above *what* we usually see here, and *considering* the amount, I'd estimate you could fetch around 30-40 *credits* for it. I don't handle the *buying* personally, so there *might* be a slight *variance*, but that estimate should be *close* to the mark, based on my *experience*."

The amount was significantly higher than I had expected. Even the lower estimate of 30 credits was equivalent to what I would earn from several days of work at Mr. Shori's. It was a considerable sum for just a portion of my natural hair.

'*But do I really need the extra credits right now?*' I pondered as Zeria guided me towards the reception area. '*Apart from Gabriel's debt repayment, I've pretty much acquired all I needed today. An additional 30-40 credits wouldn't necessarily enable anything new at the moment.*'

These thoughts occupied my mind until the enthusiastic receptionist's comment pulled me back to the present. "My goodness, what a stunning transformation! I barely recognized you! Zeria, you've outdone yourself again. Truly fantastic work!" the receptionist exclaimed, his bright smile snapping me out of my musings.

"Now, let's get you all checked out and on your way," he suggested with infectious energy.

As Zeria and the receptionist exchanged information—their eyes briefly flashing yellow in a silent exchange of data—the receptionist then engaged his own cerebral interface, indicated by the neon-blue glow in his eyes.

Zeria, ready to depart, addressed me one last time. "Well, it's *time* for me to move on to the next *masterpiece*. *Remember*, you're welcome back anytime, *whether* it's for a touch-up or when you're *ready* to try that other *style* we saved for you. *Enjoy* your new self, little lady," Zeria said with a casual ease, waving goodbye with their scissor-hand before I could respond.

As I waited, the receptionist completed his calculations and then addressed me, "Your haircut will be 106 credits as is. Alternatively, it's 59 credits if you'd like to trade in your natural hair for a discount. Or, we can offer you 32 credits if you prefer to sell your hair to us directly."

I promptly input this information into the Restricted Shard's interface, still inserted in my neck-slot. To my relief, Valeria was quick to respond, as the interface immediately displayed her approval.

[Shard-Lender has approved the transaction of 106 Credits to "Circuit Locks" for "Medium Side-Swept with Dual-Colour". An attached note is available.]

[Displaying Note: “This is more the style I would expect from a daughter of mine.”]

I couldn't help but feel a sense of validation reading the note. *‘Valeria approves of my hairstyle choice?!’* I thought, a hint of pride in my decision echoing in my mind. *‘Choosing black as the primary colour was definitely a wise move. It seems mirroring Valeria's hair colour was a success!’*

With the recent painful memories still fresh in my mind, it was relieving to know that Valeria seemed to approve of my choices. Staying in her good graces was definitely something I'd have to pay close attention to, until I was strong enough to handle this world on my own.

I completed the credit transfer and then politely declined their offer for my hair, “Thank you, but I'll keep the hair. I appreciate everything today!”

[You have transferred {c}106 to “Circuit Locks” account from the Restricted Shard.]

“Absolutely! Feel free to visit us again for any future hair needs. Have a chrometastic day!” The receptionist's enthusiastic farewell, however, made me inwardly cringe.

The word 'chrometastic'—a phrase popular in Neo Avalis, specifically due to its frequent use by the news anchors—had always felt forced to me, a far cry from the slang in the Cyberpunk games developed by CD Projekt Red in my previous life.

That slang had only been integrated into Neon Dragons around three to four years before its release, according to developer interviews. It seemed I'd have to endure this early-development jargon for a while longer.

‘Why couldn't they have just used something cool like “preem” from the start?’ I mused, longing for a touch of the familiar as I stepped out of Circuit Locks, feeling a mix of contentment from my new look and a slight annoyance at the local vernacular.

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Stepping back onto the bustling streets of the 31st floor, I quickly accessed my cerebral interface to check the time. *‘Wow, it's already 5pm?! I hope Mr. Stirling is still available for a meeting,’* I pondered, retrieving his contact details from the information Valeria had provided.

With the weight of the debt hanging over me, I knew it was time to confront the responsibility I had inadvertently taken on. I drafted a message to Mr. Stirling, opting for a straightforward and respectful tone to avoid any unintended offence.

[Mr. Stirling, this is Seraphine Vildea. Are you available at the moment to discuss the matter of the debt repayment for your earlier assistance this week?]

His response was prompt and to the point.

[Yes. Come to: (Floor 43, Room 3314).]

Curiously, he had included a map link to the location, which I found slightly redundant since it was on my own floor. *'Perhaps he's just thorough in his communications, or it's a standard practice for him to include all the information another party might need,'* I mused.

Resigned to the task at hand, I let out a heavy sigh.

The idea of repaying this debt, with its unknown implications, weighed on me. Nonetheless, I began making my way back to the restricted elevator from which I had arrived.

As I walked, I decided to quickly prepare the RaZ Mk.2 for future use.

Pulling it out and looking at it intently, I activated my [Sharpen] Perk, feeling a subtle change in the knife's weight as its edge was honed to perfection.

Observing the durasteel blade react to my ability was fascinating.

The extremely resilient durasteel seemed to literally *vanish* without a trace under the influence of my power. *'This is a downright godly power,'* I thought, impressed.

'How does the G.E.M.A. System accomplish this, anyway? And where does the material go? There's no residue, no smoke... It can't just be destroying it, can it..? Antoine Lavoisier would be rolling in his grave if that was true!' I chuckled to myself, contemplating the intriguing physics of the System's strange Perks and Abilities on my way to the elevator.

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As I approached room 3314, the door slid open with the characteristic swish of Mega Building Delta's auto doors, a sound I had long since grown accustomed to in this building.

Mr. Stirling's towering figure greeted me, his chrome arms folded over his chest, casting an imposing silhouette. A hint of surprise flickered in his eyes before he commented, "You've changed, girl. Hope that scary woman hasn't influenced you *too* much. Your new hairstyle suits you, though. Just don't let her push you around, alright?"

His vague reference left me a bit puzzled.

Was he talking about Valeria? I wondered what he meant by his cautionary words. *'Is he implying that Valeria forced me to get this haircut or something?'* I thought, slightly perplexed by his assumption.

I stepped past Mr. Stirling into his apartment, immediately noticing its stark contrast to our own.

Instead of a kitchen by the entrance, I found a makeshift home gym, complete with various weights and workout equipment. It was clear that a kitchen wasn't a priority in his space.

Moving further in, the living room came into view.

Unlike the minimalistic approach of the Vildea family, Mr. Stirling had invested in creating a cosy and inviting atmosphere. The room was filled with a harmonious arrangement of chairs,

couches, and a large dining table, all revolving around a stylish coffee table set before an imposingly sizable TV—a fitting image for the similarly imposing man himself.

What caught my attention, though, were two particular cabinets against the wall.

One was stocked with a wide array of beverages, likely alcoholic. The other, a heavy, reinforced metal cabinet, was securely locked and shuttered. '*Could it be housing weapons or maybe something even more secretive...?*' I pondered.

Mr. Stirling gestured for me to sit in a chair opposite him as he settled onto a large red-leather couch. As I took my seat, ready to discuss the debt repayment, I couldn't help but be curious about what lay within that locked cabinet, despite the obvious attempts at making sure nobody would be able to take a look inside on Mr. Stirling's part.

His gaze scanned my attire with a discerning eye, as he began, "You appear quite a lot more capable than I anticipated," he noted, focusing on my gear. "A Pseudo-Tier-1 jacket and scarf, and a concealed Tier-1 knife. Quite a formidable setup for someone your age. I must say, I'm positively impressed."

His accurate and swift assessment of my equipment, especially the well-concealed knife, caught me off guard. I had taken care to hide it beneath my jacket and undershirt, securely tucked into my waistband, yet he had identified it effortlessly.

"Don't look so surprised, kid," he said, observing my reaction. "Part of my job is to notice these details." He leaned back, his tone taking a serious turn. "Originally, I had hoped Valeria would assist me with a particular task. However, she's unwilling, and instead she suggests you could step in. *I know, and she knows*, that's not exactly feasible... That woman is so fucking irritating..."

He paused, taking a deep breath to compose himself. "Here's the deal: I'll have you run a few errands instead, and we'll consider your debt settled. These tasks shouldn't be too risky, but don't get complacent. Working for me means you'll be venturing into Ether Labs' and other corporate territories. *Tread carefully*. Corporate security is unforgiving, and they won't hesitate to eliminate perceived threats, or *worse*. While I won't knowingly send you into harm's way, my work often treads a fine line, and you'll need to as well."

His words were laced with a stern warning, making it clear that the tasks ahead were far from trivial and carried real risks. Unlike the errand for Mr. Shori, which had only seen a bit of danger due to a misfortunate timing, this arrangement seemed fraught with potential complications.

Subconsciously, my hand gravitated to the concealed knife, seeking a sense of security.

Steadying myself, I met Mr. Stirling's gaze with determination, knowing that there was no real way out of this and I needed to persevere. "I understand, Mr. Stirling. I'm ready to take on the tasks you have for me. I'm here to fulfil my obligation and repay the debt. What do you need from me?"

My voice was firm, reflecting my resolve to start taking this world a bit more seriously and take on the requests he was about to outline...