

Chapter 201 - Corporate Scion

After arriving back home at the apartment, following my shift at Mr. Shori's, I quickly checked the System for the morning's gains.

[System]: *The following Skills have gained experience: [Contortion], [CQC], [Martial-Arts], [Athletics], [Stealth], [Acrobatics], [Cooking], [Negotiation], [Lip-Reading], [Anima Razor]*

[System]: *Skill gain Highlights:*

[System]: *[Lip-Reading] Skill is 100xp away from reaching Level 1.*

[System]: *The following Attributes have gained experience: Body (+ Bonus XP), Reflex (+ Bonus XP), Intellect, Intuition, Edge, Tech, Ego, Anima (+ Bonus XP)*

[System]: *Remaining Bonus XP Available: 200.*

*'[Lip-Reading]'s almost there, huh? Nice. Slow and steady progress, without much trouble at all. Once it's Level 1, it should start moving a lot faster—getting the actual Knowledge and Muscle Memory for that stuff is going to be a massive, massive upgrade over the... Let's call it **educated** guessing I've been doing so far...'*

Thinking about upgrades reminded me of something else as well.

*'Ah, right. I should get the last Upgrade done too. **Before** I head out to Misha's.'*

My Anima Network had mostly recovered from the morning's rapid-fire downloads, to the point where I figured the last one was now safe to push through without knocking me out on the bedroom floor.

I opened my profile once more, navigated to the [Attributes] section, selected the Tech Rank 4 Upgrade—and confirmed the download.

The upgrade slid in the way Attribute Ranks usually did—heavier than a Skill download, denser in raw conceptual weight, but with far less of the intense muscle memory installation that made Skills so physically taxing.

It came in as *knowledge*, primarily.

The scope for Tech at Rank 4 was, as I'd come to expect, a full doubling of what Rank 1-3 had provided—where the initial Ranks had given me roughly a year of intensive study across materials science, fabrication principles, and the foundational logic of *how things were made* in this world, Rank 4 built on top of that and pushed it into deeper, more specialized territory.

Materials science expanded significantly, for example.

Where Rank 3 had covered baseline composite behaviors, standard alloy properties, common polymers, and the working principles of how different materials responded to stress, heat and impact, Rank 4 introduced *advanced* material families I'd previously only had passing familiarity with.

Micro-integrated composites, which were a type of layered material that adjusted its own tensile properties in response to load. Smart polymers with programmable memory states. Meta-material principles that let modern Neo Avalis engineers design structural properties that shouldn't *technically* be possible with the underlying substance.

That last part in particular was fascinating—*deeply* fascinating—even if it was unlikely to be directly relevant to me anytime in the near-to-mid-distant future. But it gave some minor context as to *how* structures like the Megabuilding itself were even physically possible in the first place.

It didn't explain them in total, of course. Not even close.

Just enough to plant the very early inklings of the beginning of an explanation—a soft whisper that these buildings *did*, in fact, make some kind of sense in this world—material, physics and engineering-wise.

The finer details would come with future Ranks or dedicated research on my part, I had no doubt, but at least the sheer *concept* itself no longer felt like it was operating on pure narrative handwaving by the game designers.

The crafting knowledge of Tech deepened alongside everything else.

Where Rank 3 had let me competently understand the fabrication process for standard-tier gear—assuming infinite resources and tools—Rank 4 unlocked comprehension of *modification* logic—the specific principles that governed how you took a piece of existing equipment and *changed* it into something better, cleaner, or purpose-fit to a particular user.

It covered things such as custom-built interfaces, compatibility layers and retrofit engineering.

Reverse-engineering principles for understanding *why* a piece of gear had been made a certain way and what constraints its designer had been working within, were included as well.

That layer also improved my grasp on the adjacent crafting Skills like [Jury-Rigging] and [Cooking]—not by directly buffing them, of course, but by providing the underlying *frameworks* they operated within.

Better general material understanding meant better decisions as a whole—in theory.

The final layer of the download was, surprisingly enough, economic in nature.

A significant chunk of the Rank 4 knowledge covered the *market* side of all of the above—pricing structures across materials tiers and Tiers, how gear got valued, *why* certain modifications carried premium costs, why certain components remained perpetually scarce.

Real, applied knowledge about *how the gear economy actually functioned*, which was hopefully going to come in quite handy the next time I was out on a mission and had dibs on some of the loot.

My focus returned to the apartment around me as the download subsided, and I took a few deep breaths, steadying myself from the mental assault it had been.

Even without the muscle-memory brutality of a full Skill download, absorbing what was effectively an entire additional year of intensive knowledge in a handful of seconds was its own particular kind of exhausting—my head felt uncomfortably full, like every thought I tried to form now had to shoulder its way past a dozen new concepts to get to the surface.

*'That was... quite a lot. But pretty neat stuff all around. Tech is such a strange Attribute... Hopefully at least **some** of it will come in handy down the line.'*

With the last of the morning's upgrades finally settled, I got up, grabbed my usual carry—and then paused, because using the usual DuraPack was, in this specific instance, a *really* bad idea.

Ela's DuraPack had been made by Misha *personally*. Everything down to the stitching and the internal compartment arrangement had come out of her workshop, from her very hands.

It was literally *Misha-made*.

Walking into the Emporium as *Sera*, carrying a DuraPack that Misha would almost assuredly recognize in a damn heartbeat, was a downright *fantastic* way to end up in an extremely awkward situation before I'd even opened my mouth.

So I rummaged through the apartment until I found the only other bag I could have sworn Valeria had stored somewhere, the same one she'd used to bring a bunch of our old apartment's stuff over—a plain, non-descript carry bag that looked *exactly* like something a teenage girl from a random corpo family would use for running errands.

I loaded up the full Ela Operator outfit into it, folded neatly and pushed to the bottom, and then headed for the door.

Which was where the actual nerves started kicking in.

I'd never actually tested [Double Life] to this degree before.

Not in a scenario where I was going to be face-to-face with someone who deeply knew and adored Ela, then immediately turn around and go face-to-face with them as *Sera*.

And of all the people to run that test with, Misha was probably—no, *definitely*—the worst possible candidate, barring *maybe* Miss K.

'Misha has seen my damn insides... Like literally, even.'

The Ripper had opened me up on a table after the Valir incident, and Misha had been in the room the entire time. She'd been elbow-deep in supervising the whole procedure.

If there was *anyone* in the entire Megabuilding who could theoretically call bullshit on me being two separate people just from raw pattern recognition alone, it was going to be her.

This was going to be a genuine, honest-to-god test of whether [Double Life] actually did what it claimed to do—completely conceal the connection between the two identities, to the point where even someone with intimate knowledge of one would be unable to catch that they were the same person.

All I had to do, on my end, was keep the two personas properly separate... Supposedly.

Which, thankfully, wasn't actually all that hard.

Because back when I'd first picked up [Double Life], I had made the conscious decision—up front, immediately—to differentiate the two personas *through entire clothing systems* rather than just relying on some subtle mental switch of *I'm now a bit more confident and direct* or something analogous.

That decision, in retrospect now, was probably the single smartest thing I had done in this whole world so far.

If I had gone the pure behavioral-shift route, keeping the two identities *cleanly* separated would have required constant, unbroken vigilance.

Any moment of exhaustion, distraction, or stress could have caused one to bleed into the other. But because I'd committed to Ela having her own full outfit, her own physical carriage, her own body language and mental behavior triggered by *literally putting on different clothes*—the switch had become almost automatic, but also physically-bound.

Ela existed around a specific gear loadout and situation. Sera existed everywhere else.

Two entirely different physical presentations, two entirely different behavioral defaults.

'Good work, Past-Sera,' I thought, with a small, private smile. '*Actually did me a real solid for once... That's novel.*'

I made my way to the elevator, punched in the 31st floor, and started running through the actual social logistics of what I was about to walk into.

Because this was going to be *strange*.

Trying to figure out how to interact with someone I already, functionally, considered a friend—but who wouldn't recognize me at all.

Who had no basis for extending any of the familiar warmth I'd come to take for granted. Who, from her perspective, was going to be meeting a complete *stranger* for the very first time—albeit one that had a strangely similar sense of fashion and hairstyle than Ela.

'Do I just interact with her normally, the way I would as Ela?' I mused, watching the floor counter climb. '*Would Sera even **know** about Gryplik culture...?*'

That was the actual question I needed to solve.

I still didn't know enough about the state of Gryplik and general Demi-human integration in Neo Avalis at *this* particular point in the timeline to really make an educated call.

In the game's version of events—which was set several years ahead of where I was now—information about Demi-humans had been slowly but steadily making its way into the general public consciousness, becoming more visible, more discussed, more *known*.

But that trajectory didn't necessarily mean the reverse: That Demi-humans had been unknown or underground *before* the point in the timeline where the game picked up.

They could have been well-known. A completely normal part of corporate Neo Avalis life for years, and then had an abrupt and sudden decline or just *happened* to become a topic of broader cultural discourse around the time the game began.

And especially when it came to *corporate* lifestyles, I effectively had no reliable information to work with whatsoever.

Most playthroughs of Neon Dragons had focused on the anti-corporate storylines and characters.

That was, well... *the whole point*. It was Cyberpunk.

That's the whole damn genre in a nutshell, really.

Corporate-adjacent situations were almost always shown through the lens of characters who were fundamentally anti-establishment—outsiders looking in, breaking in, extracting from, or actively fighting against corporate structures.

Rarely from the inside, and rarely in a way that gave meaningful cultural context about how those corporate strata *actually functioned* day-to-day.

Which was exactly why the long-standing question of “*can I speak Gryplik to Misha without causing a major city-wide incident*” had remained stubbornly unanswered up until now.

I'd intended to ask Valeria about it at some point.

But *how*, exactly, was I supposed to bring that up naturally?

Up until now, I'd deliberately kept Ela's side of things sectioned off from my family—especially Valeria—in order to try and keep my Operator plans hidden as much as possible. Now that Valeria very clearly knew, that was going to have to change, of course.

This visit was going to be the very first time Misha would enter Valeria's awareness by name at all. Which meant that any conversation I could have with Valeria about Gryplik-speech acceptability, Demi-human corporate visibility, or general knowledge of them within polite society... would only be possible *after* I'd already had this first meeting.

Which meant I was going to have to go in blind. Making a judgment call in the moment, and living with whatever the consequences turned out to be.

'Okay. Safest option: Go in with about as much knowledge as Ela would have. No more, no less.'

Basic awareness of Gryplik-adjacent speech patterns—the third-person self-reference, lack of single-person references and pronouns—could be reasonably explained away as *just a nice-to-know for a corporate family*, especially one that dealt with international or inter-corporate business.

Nothing too far out of the ordinary. Nothing that would raise any undue flags.

But my actual proficiency in the language itself?

That would unfortunately have to stay under wraps for a while longer. At least until I could somehow tease the answer out of Valeria without directly revealing that I already spoke it.

Because revealing *that* particular skill without a plausible explanation was going to open up a whole chain of extremely uncomfortable questions I did not currently have good answers for—if I would ever have them.

'Now the only question left is what I tell Misha if she asks how I found her store,' I thought as I stepped out of the elevator. *'Should I be sneaky and mention that Ela sent me...?'*

I considered that for exactly one full second, then shook my head sharply.

*'No! **Obviously not**, you absolute moron. Unless the goal is to actively create a direct connection between my two identities and risk burning them both for absolutely no reason whatsoever. What the hell are you even thinking?'*

I refocused on the thoroughfare and the people around me, mostly so I didn't accidentally plow into someone while lost in my own head, and settled on my approach.

*'Remember—you are Seraphine Vildea. Daughter of Valeria Vildea. You are **not** Ela right now,'* I reminded myself, consciously and deliberately. *'You're a corporate scion. Not anywhere near the level of Tom, Jin, or Kenzie, sure, but still one. You don't actually owe any answers to anyone here—even to Misha. She's **just** a store owner as far as Sera is concerned. Nothing more.'*

I took a breath, then let another thought settle in behind it.

'And if I ever decide, later on, to reveal to her that Sera is actually Ela, she'll absolutely understand why I kept things quiet in the meantime. For my safety. For hers.'

Of that, I had very little doubt.

If there was one thing Misha had been consistently, unambiguously clear about, it was that she did not ever want me to end up in danger—full stop, no exceptions.

And accidentally revealing the Sera and Ela connection, while monsters like Valir were still very much out for my head, would fall squarely under the *unnecessary danger* category that she would be *vocally* upset with me about.

'Even if it means playing dress-up around her for a little while to get this particular purchase done,' I thought, then paused as another wrinkle occurred to me. 'Although, ultimately, she's probably going to notice if Ela starts showing up with the exact same Kinetic Dampening Mask that Sera bought a few days earlier... But I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.'

When I finally arrived at the entrance to the Emporium, I stopped just short of the door and took a proper moment to center myself.

I pushed my chest out slightly. Straightened my back ram-rod straight.

Held my chin ever so slightly upward, at the same kind of angle I'd seen Valeria so often adopt. It wasn't arrogance—that would have been too far.

It was just *presence*—the unspoken assertion that I belonged wherever I was, and that anyone else present should adjust accordingly.

'Go time.'

I walked into the Emporium and headed straight for the bell without breaking stride, ringing it without wasting a moment on niceties or ambient browsing. A corporate scion had things to do and a very limited window of time for pleasantries.

I only had to wait a few moments before I heard the familiar rapid pitter-patter of Misha's approach coming from the backroom.

"Misha is here!" she announced, in that same buoyant, energetic voice as always, as the heavy doors swung open with her usual dramatic flourish.

And a veritable array of emotions played across her face in the span of maybe half a second.

The first was pure, immediate elation as her eyes were naturally drawn to my hairstyle—the distinctive VonIX-black and neon-cyan that had become one of Ela's most recognizable signatures. A smile almost broke across her face, sharp green teeth flashing at the edges of her lips as recognition lit her up from the inside.

Then it *froze*—halfway to fully formed.

Her four eyes continued their downward sweep—moving off the hair to my face, to my clothing, to my posture, to the way I was carrying myself—and everything about her expression shifted.

Elation became confusion. Confusion softened into sadness. Sadness spiraled back into more confusion, as her four eyes darted across my entire body in rapid, overlapping motions, visibly trying to make sense of what they were showing her.

The look on her face when she fully processed that I was not, in fact, Ela—despite the hair, despite the coloring, despite that first flash of recognition—was only there for the briefest of moments before her professional composure snapped back into place.

But I saw it.

And it *hurt*.

To say the sad flicker on Misha's face hurt me would have been a criminal *understatement*.

That brief flash of genuine, unguarded disappointment was almost enough to make me throw the entire plan out the window right then and there—to just cross the last few steps between us and scoop her up in the kind of hug that would have made both of our days significantly better.

'You'll be back here as Ela within the hour. Just give it that long. Be strong, Sera.'

I gave myself the internal reminder as firmly as I could manage and held my composure.

Misha, meanwhile, recovered with impressive speed.

Her professional smile snapped back into place—polished and utterly welcoming, indistinguishable from the one she probably gave every first-time customer that walked through her doors—and she took the additional steps needed to close the distance between us with her usual bright energy.

"Welcome to Misha's Emporium! Misha welcomes the new customer with open arms! How may Misha be of service today?"