

## **Chapter 95 - Loaded Questions**

Gabriel's daily "*on my way home*" message jolted me out of the coding zone with all the grace of a cold bucket of water.

*'Huh... Already...?'*

Checking the time, I felt my stomach drop a bit—I'd somehow already blown through five hours on just the first part of this Quick-Hack code.

Figuring now was as good a time as any for a break, I logged out of the development environment, setting the deck aside on the nightstand. A long, careful stretch set off a whole chorus of crackles and pops in my back and neck, reminding me of the marathon session I'd just put my body through.

Between the stress of this morning's data drop, a thousand rounds at the shooting range, the alleyway brawl with Jade against the full-on crew of blanks, and five hours of barely moving while staring at code, I felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

*'My old life's doctors would've had my head if they heard this rundown of why I'm sore...'*

But, aches or not, I couldn't deny that the day had been worth it. I had rarely, if ever, gotten this much experience in such a short amount of time—and made actual progress on the things I was trying to achieve, at the same time.

Besides, with tonight's Rest Function, the pain would be history by morning.

That is... until I remembered tonight's Rest Function would be my last one before the Operator meeting. I'd need every bit of time to finish the Quick-Hack in time.

"I'll just have to be a little more careful then, I guess..." I muttered, making my way to the kitchen. Dinner prep was easy tonight since I'd brought some ramen from Mr. Shori's place again, giving me a bit of mental space to mull over the real question gnawing at me: *'What do I use this General Skill Point on?'*

I only had a few hours left before the System would go ahead and claim my Task rewards for this third data collection, automatically assigning the Skill Point to something random again, like it had with [Martial Arts] last time.

Definitely not eager for another muscle-download blackout in front of the whole room, I figured I'd be better off making a decision now before anyone else got home.

At this point, I only really had a handful of realistic choices for where to put this Skill Point.

With the Operator meeting practically around the corner—and no more data-collection Tasks to rely on—this was my last "free" point before the big event.

So, whatever I chose, it *had* to make an impact.

If I wanted to make a good impression on the Operator, I'd need to focus on something directly related to my netrunner path. This meant looking at [Programming], [Netrunning], [Manifestation], or [Quick-Hacks]. I had already committed to presenting myself as a fledgling netrunner, so bulking up any of these could give me the boost I'd need to stand out.

The other routes? They were pretty much out of the question.

I didn't have the gear, combat experience, or even the intimidating presence to be Muscle. The idea of being a Face or Blade? Also out—no experience, no connections, no social skills to speak of, and *definitely* none of the ruthlessness required for being a Blade.

Being a Runner was the only realistic option for me at this stage, but with my limited time remaining, the point *had* to count.

The System gave me a crazy advantage, sure, but it wasn't exactly a god-mode switch. My Skills were still so raw that just keeping up with others was an achievement.

Impressing? That was another thing entirely.

On the other side, there were Skills that could directly sway the meeting itself—[Intimidation], [Negotiation], [Appraise], and, weirdly enough, [Maid]. Each offered some edge in a conversation, whether by enhancing my social skills directly or giving me extra info I could leverage, depending on how things went down.

The last group was more of a “would-be-nice-to-have” lineup—Skills that were either tough to train or ones I didn't even know where to start with.

Stuff like [Slicing], [Jury-Rigging], and, as much as I hated to admit it, [Murder].

That last one was a staple in every build I'd ever seen in Neon Dragons, and it wasn't hard to see why. Killing efficiently wasn't just passive in a world like this; it was practically necessary, and the benefits were huge. Whether I liked it or not, knowing how to take someone down without fumbling was as much of a survival skill here as something like [First-Aid] was.

I opened my Skill Interface and started narrowing down options, knocking off Skills that were close to levelling up, locked by Attribute limits, or unlikely to make any real impact at the upcoming meeting or in the immediate future.

When I finished, I was down to only a handful: [Manifestation], [Slicing], [Negotiation], [Jury-Rigging], and [Murder].

[Manifestation] stood out immediately.

With everything I'd recently learned, it was clear that this Skill was key for practically anything netrunner-related thanks to its ties with Cyber. Levelling it up to 3 would probably bring another knowledge download and, just as enticing, access to a Perk. But when I tried to view the Perk Tree, the System threw an error, basically telling me to get lost and check back later.

‘*What the...?*’

I’d never been locked out of a Perk Tree before.

Access to it was supposed to be a basic perk of levelling a Skill to 1.

My only guess? It had something to do with the recent Anima integration.

Maybe the System was reconfiguring the Perks, blending them into this new version of [Manifestation] that tapped into Anima as well as programming. So the System might take its time adjusting the Perks to handle both.

But this uncertainty left me wondering if investing my point there *now* would be a waste.

The Operator I was about to meet might not even be a netrunner to begin with, so banking on something as niche as [Manifestation] and its enigmatic Perks, that might not even be available right away, could backfire if the guy was more into muscle than code.

Explaining Cyber to someone who only cared about the calibre of their gun or the circumference of their cybernetic arm’s biceps wouldn’t exactly win me any points.

[Slicing] was quickly thrown out for similar reasons.

Although useful for emergencies and general intel, it wouldn’t do much in the short term. It was more of a Skill that’d come in handy later down the line.

That left [Negotiation], [Jury-Rigging], and, *yeah*, [Murder].

I was still dead-set against [Murder]—both the Skill and the act.

I knew that, eventually, I’d *have* to get over this reluctance.

This world wasn’t exactly big on respecting individual life, and I’d have to toughen up if I wanted to make it as an Operator. But for now? With everything going on, I just wasn’t in the right headspace to go down that road.

I could see the potential in upping [Murder] through Skill Points—the Knowledge and Muscle Memory downloads would probably make future... “experience gains” in the Skill easier.

But did I actually *want* that? No, absolutely not.

If I was going to cross that line, it’d be on my own terms, with a fully conscious decision, not as some byproduct of the System making me into a pre-programmed killer.

“Killing should *a/ways* be a conscious choice,” I reiterated firmly to myself as I placed two empty bowls onto the table, shutting down the possibility of putting my Skill Point into [Murder] for good.

That left just [Negotiation] and [Jury-Rigging].

[Jury-Rigging] was kind of the wildcard here. I hadn't really thought of it as a contender until I went through my Skills, trying to weed out anything that wouldn't really benefit from an investment.

That's when I realised—this was one Skill I had almost no clue how to actually train.

Sure, I'd gained a little experience with it during one of my Data-Collection Tasks, but that had been a fluke, not something I could count on repeating.

The whole point of [Jury-Rigging] was to make things work on the fly—taking random parts and creating quick fixes or real-life hacks to solve a problem on the spot.

That's the kind of skill that would be invaluable in all kinds of situations, not just for an Operator.

It could even be helpful at Mr. Shori's shop. Maybe I could rig up a solution to fix some of those chairs in the back, or boost the burners during a rush.

But here's the thing: I had zero experience on anything remotely handy, either in this life or my last. Sera's body didn't naturally know its way around makeshift repairs either, so levelling up [Jury-Rigging] the usual way was turning out to be way harder than I'd anticipated. That was a problem I could solve right here and now by dropping this General Skill Point into it.

The first level wouldn't make me into McGuyver himself, sure, but it'd give me a starting point.

And once I got the hang of it, going from Level 1 to Level 2 wouldn't be too tough, especially if I focused on practising it over the next few days. That'd give me two solid levels in [Jury-Rigging], which was probably enough to make a decent impression.

Having even a little knowledge about rigging up quick fixes could be the exact kind of edge I needed going into the meeting, especially since I didn't actually know what it would look like. Whether they'd be interviewing me, full-on testing me, or something as simple as just sizing me up.

Every Operator worked differently, so having a broader skill set might just be what set me apart from others. It honestly felt like one of those job interviews where they throw vague "desirable qualities" at you and expect you to somehow know what they're really looking for.

I'd never liked those kinds of games back then, and now? Definitely still not my favourite, but hey, it was part of the deal; so nothing I could really do about it now.

The last and most obvious option on my list was [Negotiation].

It was arguably the best fit for a situation like this, where the main goal was convincing someone to vouch for me. Plus, it was already at Level 2—just one step from the Level 3 milestone with its hefty knowledge download and coveted Perk Point unlock.

The only reason I hadn't jumped straight at it was that I was trying to take a more measured approach to decision-making in general. Maybe it was stubbornness, or just me wanting to prove that I'd outgrown my impulsive tendencies from my past life, but either way; I had decided I wanted to think things through properly.

The downside of it, though, was clear: [Negotiation] wouldn't do much for me beyond the conversation itself.

Where [Jury-Rigging] offered real, practical advantages, [Negotiation] was purely social and theoretical. If the Operator didn't actually give me a chance to talk and flex those particular skills, I'd be out of luck—and potentially wasting the point.

It was a gamble, sure, but so was every other option at this point.

No use in second-guessing the last two choices now.

I tapped into the System Interface, bringing up the [Negotiation] Perk Tree, fully expecting another error message to slap me in the face and tell me to fuck right off.

But, to my surprise and slight relief, the list loaded smoothly.

"Alright, let's see what my Point might actually get me..." I muttered, scrolling through the Perks, my attention split between the list and the ramen bowls I was absent-mindedly setting up. I could feel the clock ticking as I went through the motions of finishing up the meal, realising that my decision window was narrowing fast.

[Bartering Master] (Requirement: Negotiation 3)

*Special deal, just for you.* — Gain the ability to increase the number of successes on any barter attempt by one, regardless of the initial outcome. This bonus may exceed the usual maximum number of successes.

[Corporate Espionage] (Requirement: Negotiation 3)

*You want to explain to the suits why I'm late? Go ahead.* — Unlock additional insights into corporate culture, allowing you to expertly navigate conversations with corporate members. Drastically improves your ability to talk your way into, out of, or through any corporate environment.

[Smooth Operator] (Requirement: Negotiation 3)

*We don't need to do this; I'm just here to do a job.* — Gain the ability to exude an aura of trust and ease, making it far easier to de-escalate situations where you are not immediately recognized as an enemy.

[Cultural Savant] (Requirement: Negotiation 3)

*Japanese? My fifteenth language, actually.* — Instinctively identify, understand and navigate cultural nuances, granting you a unique advantage in negotiations with people from unfamiliar backgrounds.

[Underworld Connections] (Requirement: Negotiation 3)

*The boss wanted to see me; so get out of my way.* — Unlock additional insights into gang dynamics, giving you the ability to read and manipulate the social cues of the underworld.

Drastically improves your ability to talk your way into, out of, or through conversations with gang members.

The sheer scope and impact of these Perks had me reeling, as usual.

Seeing them laid out in front of me like this—not just as game features but as actual abilities I could tap into to influence the world—was a little mind-bending.

Something like [Bartering Master] basically tipped into straight up *reality-warping* territory, bending people to react in ways they normally wouldn't, just because I'd invested a point in the right Skill.

It was wild to think about, and yet, I couldn't help but wonder about the "how" behind it.

Did the System subtly alter people's behaviour? Was it tapping into some unseen layer of reality to tweak reactions? And was it even ethical to use a Perk that could steer people's decisions like this? Was everyone around me just a set of variables the System could adjust, or were they real people, just... somehow influenced by a System they didn't even know existed?

Or maybe—Before I could spiral down that rabbit hole any further, I violently shook my head.

*'Not the time, Sera,'* I forced myself to focus.

My main question now: Would any of these Perks pack more punch than a couple of levels in [Jury-Rigging], especially with the real possibility that I wouldn't get a ton of time to actually talk with the Operator?

Each one looked downright tempting, offering some serious boosts in its own way.

First up was [Bartering Master].

As good as it was, I doubted I'd be haggling with the Operator for their endorsement—it didn't seem like that kind of situation. Even if bartering *did* somehow come into play, one success alone wouldn't likely tip the scales for something this major.

So that one, while good, was a bit of a pass.

[Corporate Espionage] and [Underworld Connections] were both intriguing, primarily for the extra knowledge they'd bring in rather than any immediate advantage. They'd be great for background info but would only really come into play if the Operator somehow counted as a gang member or corp insider—not a safe gamble.

Still, [Corporate Espionage] had an extra layer for me: Insight into the Dojo crew and Valeria.

With my current circle of contacts, that might be worth banking on. Having some inside knowledge on the Arkion Dojo folks' backgrounds and quirks? Not a bad safety net to have around; not to mention the whole can of worms that was dealing with Valeria.

[Smooth Operator] was the only real “Perk”-like option besides [Bartering Master], giving me an actual, tangible *something* to work with: An aura of trust and ease I could activate at will.

That kind of impression boost could go a long way, regardless of any other factors in the meeting. Plus, if I could switch it on and off, I could keep the whole “System-assisted charm” under wraps when I wanted to; a definite mega-plus!

Finally, there was [Cultural Savant].

At first glance, I’d nearly skipped over it since I already had the [Polyglot] Trait from Day One.

But as I took a second look, the specific wording stuck out: “Identify” and “unfamiliar background.”

[Polyglot] was great for helping me pick up on cultural nuances—*assuming* I already had a clue about the culture in question. With something obvious, like a Gryplik such as Misha, it was pretty straightforward since they looked and acted so differently from humans.

But identifying if someone was Filipino, Korean, or Japanese without any prior exposure? Yeah, that was a different story altogether.

[Polyglot] could help bridge the gap with its language-based insights, picking up on phrases and terms to offer clues, but [Cultural Savant] would just tell me, *flat-out*, what culture I was dealing with.

Instead of being redundant, as I had initially pegged it as, [Cultural Savant] would veritably *level up* [Polyglot] entirely, turning it into a complete powerhouse of a Trait/Perk combination.

No more guessing or piecing things together—I’d just immediately know what I was looking at, how to handle it on a social level and have the language to do so to boot.

For an Operator, that was literally game-changing.

Neo Avalis was practically a powder keg of cultural complexity, where even mid-to-high-level characters in the game struggled with managing the dynamics across different Fixers.

Most people would just play up to one or two groups in any given playthrough, avoiding cultural missteps as they rarely invested into more languages or cultural lessons with their hard-earned Credits.

But with [Polyglot] *and* [Cultural Savant] in my toolkit? I could walk straight into the Operator meeting with a massive advantage if this particular Operator had *any* strong cultural ties at all.

And even beyond this one meeting, having a foothold in navigating Neo Avalis’s diverse Fixers and Operators could be game-changing for the long haul.

The idea of becoming a Face, someone who could lead a whole team of Operators, suddenly didn’t feel so far-fetched anymore. I could open doors with all kinds of Fixers

across the city, not just stick to a couple of neighbourhoods or one particular sector of the city

The more I thought about it, the more I was itching to lock in that Skill Point for [Negotiation] and select [Cultural Savant] as my Perk. The synergy felt too good to pass up. But then I hesitated, second-guessing if this was *really* the best way to spend my limited resources.

I went over each Perk again, slowly this time, trying to visualise when each one might actually be useful, where they might fall short, or when I'd be wishing I'd gone with something else—like [Jury-Rigging].

But even with all that second- and third-guessing, I kept coming back to the same conclusion: [Cultural Savant] paired with [Polyglot] was too powerful to ignore.

Sure, it might end up being useless for this one meeting if the Operator didn't have any strong cultural ties, but the boost from reaching [Negotiation] Level 3 would still be valuable for it regardless. As much as I wanted to build up [Jury-Rigging], it wasn't going to give me the immediate edge I needed for this particular moment.

Decision made, I accepted the rewards for the third Data Collection task.

[System]: *Task Completed: Mr. Stirling's Request (Third Data Collection)*

[System]: *You have gained 150 Character Experience.*

[System]: *You have gained 1 [General Skill Point].*

[System]: *Use [General Skill Point] on [Negotiation] Level 2? Y/N.*

[System]: *1,300xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.*

[System]: *[Negotiation] Skill has reached Level 3. Knowledge and Muscle Memory download available. [Negotiation] Perk Point obtained.*

[System]: *[Cultural Savant] (Negotiation) Perk acquired.*

As soon as the interface cleared, I confirmed the Knowledge and Muscle Memory download, letting the System take over as I settled into my seat at the table, ready to absorb everything it had in store.

As the download kicked in, it was like the floodgates of negotiation tactics and strategies burst open in my mind and I was glad I had decided to sit down first.

Where [Negotiation] Level 2 had been the basics—how to open a conversation, common strategies like “anchoring” or “mirroring” to build rapport—Level 3 took it a whole step further.

Concepts that had felt abstract before now made perfect sense, like I'd spent a year studying the art of reading between the lines, feeling out the subtle shifts in power dynamics, and knowing how to adjust my tone and word choice to steer conversations in my favour.

One of the most immediate revelations was understanding something called “framing,” which essentially let me set the stage for a conversation in a way that subtly nudged the other person's perception of reality. Instead of just reacting to what the other person said, framing



allowed me to create the context, to influence just how they'd respond based on the perspective I subtly offered them first.

I also picked up a stronger grasp on the concept of "detachment" and why it mattered.

Being able to step back mentally, to not take anything said as a personal attack or challenge, was something seasoned negotiators mastered early on. The more I could remove my emotions from the situation, the sharper my responses would be; something my Edge and Ego would be truly invaluable for.

I felt the download guiding me through scenarios where letting the other person vent or rant without reacting would often lead them to soften up later, almost as if they'd expended their ammunition on air.

There were even a few practical muscle memories thrown in, like maintaining subtle but effective eye contact—just long enough to make an impression without making the other person uncomfortable—and nodding slowly in response to draw them into speaking more.

Somehow, I instinctively knew the ideal timing for short, "encouraging" phrases like "I see" or "Go on," things I'd always heard were useful but had never really internalised.

These aspects and more were all crammed into my brain in a matter of seconds, as I simply let the System take control and rewire my memories and muscles once more to give me just another small edge; hopefully one that would be large enough to make an impact on a seasoned Operator in just a few days time.

As the download wrapped up and I blinked back to reality, the now-familiar throb of a headache started tapping behind my eyes—a little side effect I'd gotten used to, especially with the bigger downloads like this one.

I was still rubbing my temples when Gabriel walked through the front door, looking a bit taken aback at the sight of me already at the table, dinner set up and waiting.

"Huh...? Everything alright, Sera?" he asked, raising an eyebrow with that mix of caution and curiosity he always wore when things were out of the ordinary.

"Yeah, just had a bit of extra time after work," I said, managing an easy smile. "Thought I'd actually, you know, prepare dinner for once. Nothing to stress about, Gabe—promise."

He nodded, clearly still a little sceptical, but he settled into his chair anyway. It had been a while since we'd both been able to sit down for a proper meal.

Lately, one or both of us had been too drained to really talk or catch up, just grabbing a few bites in passing before crashing.

Tonight, though, I had a few questions that had been nagging at me for a while, and I wanted Gabe in a decent mood—comfortable and hopefully chatty enough to give me some real answers.

A good meal was definitely the way to kick things off.

Dinner went smoothly, Gabe and I catching each other up on our lives—how work was going, the usual frustrations, and how Miss K's dojo was practically built to knock the sense out of us every time we showed up.

By the time we'd finished eating and were just leaning back in that comfortable post-meal silence, I knew it was finally time to bring up the question that'd been bugging me for a while.

"Hey, Gabe..." I started, adding just a touch of that new [Negotiation] finesse into my tone.

"How come I don't have anyone in my contacts? I mean, aside from the people I've met since the coma, mum, dad, and you. Nobody ever got in touch after, you know... everything. Do I... Does that mean I didn't have any friends before...?"

I watched his every reaction, leaning on my new skills to pick up anything he might try to hold back.

But almost instantly, I realised I was overthinking it—this was Gabriel, after all. The guy had the subterfuge skills of a golden retriever, and any unease from my question showed plainly on his face.

*'Right... maybe I should remember that not everyone here is living some double life in the shadows,'* I thought, scolding myself a bit as I waited for him to answer.

Gabriel's face tightened, and I could almost see the wheels in his head spinning, trying to balance honesty with not wanting to hurt my feelings.

He gave a little cough, shifted in his chair, and started, "Oh, you *definitely* had friends, Sera! I mean, you're... you know, you're not exactly the 'no friends' type." He forced a smile, his words trailing off as he scrambled for the right thing to say.

"Or... I guess you wouldn't know...?"

He looked away for a second, clearly debating something, then turned back to me, visibly trying to keep it light. "It's just, you know, the whole... link issues. After the, uh, *incident*... they had to replace it entirely. Whatever happened to you almost destroyed it, really. I guess that's why there aren't any contacts on the one you got now."

I almost chimed in, but my [Negotiation] told me to stay quiet, to let him work through it, even as his face hinted that he was holding something else back.

He started to reach for his drink, caught himself, then seemed to resign to the fact that there was no sidestepping whatever truth he was trying to dance around.

With a heavy sigh, he finally leaned back in his chair, tossing up his hands.

"Okay, look," he began, his shoulders slumping, "I... I don't know every detail about all of this, alright? But yes, you had friends. You talked about them to me sometimes. It's just that... well... the contacts were on your old link, and since it got wrecked, they were basically lost when they replaced your link. Valeria... Well, she's the one who kept the

original information of whatever was left on your link; including the contacts. But, she's always been kind of firm that..." He hesitated, trying to find the least loaded words.

"That your circle wasn't exactly... *up to her standards*," he said, finally settling on a diplomatic answer. The rest of his thoughts hung in the air, unspoken but obvious: Valeria hadn't given the contacts back after the fact, judging that it was better for Sera—for me—not to know about those friends at all.

He gave me an apologetic look, as though he half-expected me to be upset with him for revealing even this much.

I took a slow, deep breath, feeling the pieces settle into place. Gabriel's expression was apologetic, maybe even a little guilty, like he thought he'd let me down by saying it out loud. But I just gave him a reassuring smile, trying to ease that look off his face.

"Gabe, you don't have to feel bad about it," I said calmly, keeping my tone steady. "It's not like I even remember any of them anyway." I shrugged, watching the relief and momentary cringe at me mentioning my loss of memory soften his expression somewhat. "Honestly, if Valeria thought they weren't the best crowd, maybe she had her reasons too. But at this point, it's all just so... *abstract*. Just something I feel like I'm missing because it's supposed to be there, you know?"

He nodded, looking more relaxed, his shoulders dropping as he finally took a sip of his drink.

"Still," I added, curiosity slowly taking over. If there were people out there that knew the original Sera and that Valeria didn't like; they sounded like exactly the kind of people I might want to know more about, "if you know anything about them... what were they like? Even just a little bit... Tell me what you remember about them. Please..."