

Chapter 28 - Consequences I

“Let us commence with our meal, as I’m sure the day has left us all famished,” Valeria declared, breaking through my contemplation of the credit shard.

As Valeria gracefully concluded her speech, she gestured towards the elegantly set dinner table with a flourish that seemed to say, *'Indulge yourselves, peasants.'* It was an invitation that bordered on a command, delivered with the poise and grandeur characteristic of her.

Our plates, identical to those from our previous family dinner, were exquisite porcelain - a rarity in the stark world of Neon Dragons. Each plate had been shrouded by a silvery dome ever since we had entered the living room, adding an element of mystery to what culinary delights might lay beneath.

Eager not to provide Valeria any cause for criticism, I delicately lifted the dome from my plate, striving to embody grace and poise, aiming to mirror Valeria’s general demeanour as much as possible.

Gabriel and Oliver, on the other hand, removed their covers with less finesse, Gabriel's clumsy action drawing a slight narrowing of Valeria’s eyes. His reaction was akin to a physical recoil from being struck across the face. In stark contrast, Oliver received a radiant smile from Valeria, which sent an involuntary chill down my spine.

I couldn't help but ponder the stark differences in her reactions. Valeria's treatment of Oliver was strikingly different from her interactions with Gabriel and me. *'She's the strangest person I've ever met,'* I thought. *'How can she exhibit such contrasting attitudes towards Oliver compared to Gabriel and myself? We're supposed to be her children but she treats us like a pack of street rats.'*

Putting the thoughts aside for now, not willing to get distracted while I tried to keep my “perfect-corporate-daughter” act running, I took a closer look at the meal that Valeria had prepared for me. The moment I did, however, I was frozen solid at the sight.

The meal in front of me was nothing short of a culinary masterpiece, a stark contrast to the simple noodles from our last family dinner. Instead, it was a lavish spread that seemed to leap straight out of a high-end Cyberpunk-genre magazine.

The plate before me showcased a culinary rarity in the dystopian expanse of Neon Dragons—a sumptuous piece of lab-grown *meat*.

In a world where genuine meat was more of a legend than a dietary staple for the common folk, its presence on my plate was downright mythological. I recalled an episode from one of the Neon Dragons’ playthroughs that I had followed in which the main character had embarked on an elaborate three-part quest just to acquire a mere 220-gram portion of this coveted ingredient for a special recipe to unlock a specific achievement in the game.

Yet here it was, served to me as part of a seemingly simple, yet altogether very strange, family dinner.

The meat was, naturally, expertly cooked, its outer layer seared to a delightful caramelised hue, indicating a mastery of culinary technique.

It lay amidst an arrangement of other equally impressive components.

There were mounds of vibrant green algae, a staple of the Neo Avalis diet, cooked to a tender perfection that belied its humble origins. Beside the algae, a small cluster of soy-based accompaniments added a contrasting texture, their crispness a perfect foil to the meat's tenderness.

But what truly set the plate apart was the presence of seemingly real *eggs* as well, another rarity in this futuristic world I had found myself in. They were prepared with a finesse that allowed the yolks to remain runny, adding a rich, luxurious element to the meal.

It was clear that no expense had been spared in preparing this dish, a striking contrast to our last, simpler meal.

Each element of the dish was a blend of the Cyberpunk-genre staples with a touch of rare, luxurious ingredients, creating a balance that was both intriguing and mouthwatering.

The extravagance of it all made me wonder if this was Valeria's way of acknowledging my surprisingly swift recovery and Gabriel's recent survival, or whether there were other reasons at play.

Was it an olive branch, or perhaps a celebration in her own unique, inscrutable style?

The complexity of Valeria's motives were as hard to decipher as ever, but at that moment, I chose to focus on the meal, appreciating the effort and resources that had gone into it.

'Enjoy the meal now, ponder the reasons later,' I thought to myself, preparing to savour this rare treat. After all, it was very likely going to be one of the only times I was going to eat meat or eggs in this world, unless I managed to somehow snatch a well-paying gig somewhere.

Glancing at Gabriel and Oliver's plates, they too were graced with equally lavish meals. Gabriel began to speak, his voice tinged with awe, "Whoa, Mum, this is...!" But he cut himself off abruptly, catching a sharp look from Valeria.

The unspoken message was clear: Casual remarks were not welcome at this table. If you wanted to speak up, you had to do so by observing proper form.

Oliver, meanwhile, expressed his amazement immediately afterwards, in his usual, casual way. "Wow, honey, this is incredible! You really didn't have to go to such lengths for us, you know?!" His words were genuine, reflecting the surprise and appreciation he felt.

The moment Oliver expressed his gratitude, Valeria's demeanour shifted dramatically.

Gone was the stern, commanding presence, replaced instead by a radiance of almost childlike glee. Her response to Oliver, dripping with an overly sweet affection, was a stark

contrast to her usual austere self and a polar opposite of the way she had reacted to Gabriel's earlier attempts.

"Oh, it's absolutely my pleasure, darling! I'd do anything for you!" she cooed, her voice a syrupy concoction of delight and warmth. The contrast and the overly sweet nature of it made me almost throw up in my mouth, but I barely managed to keep the bile down. "After all, it's a special day, and what better way to celebrate than with some extraordinary cuisine?"

Choosing to focus on the last part of her words, rather than having to hold back the bile from even acknowledging the first part, my prior thoughts seemed to have been confirmed.

'*So this is Valeria's way of showing her affection... maybe?*' I thought to myself, trying to slowly, piece by piece, put together some kind of a profile for the person that was Sera's—and now my—biological mother.

Focusing her attention back to the rest of the table after seemingly having to forcibly rip her eyes from Oliver, Valeria's face returned to its usual cold, regal demeanour as she imperiously gestured towards the food, she announced, "Please, enjoy this meal. It is but a small token in light of the events we've recently navigated."

I opted for a deep bow, silently acknowledging her generosity without overstepping any boundaries. Recalling the myriad of high-society dramas I had watched in my past life, I was keenly aware of the unspoken rules at such formal gatherings, which I silently hoped applied to this strange family dinner dynamic as well.

The key was to follow the host's lead, and in this case, Valeria hadn't explicitly indicated for us to begin eating. '*If she truly intends for us to start, she'll make it clear,*' I reasoned internally. Valeria wasn't one to mince words or be indirect in her commands.

My cautious approach proved prudent when I heard the clatter of utensils from Gabriel's direction. He had eagerly reached for his cutlery but was abruptly halted by a sharp look from Valeria, causing him to involuntarily drop them back onto the table. It was a clear reminder of the careful balance required in navigating this family dinner.

Valeria's following movements were an elegant display of poise and precision.

With a practised, languid grace, she lifted her fork and knife, piercing the fork lightly into the succulent meat. As she did so, the aroma that wafted up was tantalising, and a bead of juice glistened at the puncture site, enhancing the appeal of the dish.

All the while, her steel-grey eyes remained fixed on Gabriel, unyielding and intense.

For a moment, I was genuinely concerned for Gabriel's well-being.

The level of tension that Valeria's mere gaze could impose was something I knew all too well, something that I was sure could stop somebody's heart dead. It was almost as if the air in the room had become dense, laden with unspoken expectations and silent judgments.

Finally, Valeria relented, her focus shifting to her meal as she began to slice through the meat with precise, calculated strokes. I could hear Gabriel next to me, his breaths quick and shallow, a subtle indication of the immense relief he felt at being released from the matriarch's scrutinising stare.

Deciding to let Gabriel recover on his own, I turned my attention back to my own plate. It was essential that I focused on the task at hand: Leaving a lasting, positive impression on Valeria.

Mimicking Valeria's elegant actions, I used all my control and finesse, a direct application of my refined Reflex Attribute. It was challenging to maintain my composure, given the enticing allure of the meal before me, but I leaned heavily on the strength of my Ego Attribute as well, which seemed to always become particularly assertive in Valeria's presence.

With deliberate slowness, I emulated Valeria's precise movements, carefully cutting a piece of the delectable meat and bringing it to my lips. I mirrored the timing of her first bite with precision, savouring the delightful flavour as I gently closed my teeth around the succulent morsel.

It was a balancing act of indulging in the exquisite taste while maintaining an air of sophisticated restraint.

The first bite of the lab-grown meat was an explosion of flavours in my mouth, far surpassing any street food I had consumed so far in the world of Neon Dragons. It was a revelation, a symphony of taste and texture, exquisitely prepared and cooked to perfection.

As I chewed, I couldn't help but compare it to the meat from my past life.

This was different, better in a way that was hard to articulate. It was as if the chefs had found the ideal balance of flavours, creating a culinary masterpiece that transcended my previous experiences on a fundamental level.

However, as the initial delight began to settle, something else made its presence known—a subtle, lingering aftertaste that felt severely out of place.

It was likely due to my growing [Cooking] Skill and slowly increasing Intuition Attribute that I could even begin to detect it. This was no ordinary flavour; it was something that *shouldn't* be there, a slight but unmistakable hint of something artificial, perhaps a seasoning or additive not typically associated with high-quality meat.

This discovery set off alarm bells in my mind, igniting a mixture of curiosity and concern.

What was this unexpected component, and why was it in this otherwise impeccable dish?

I immediately stopped chewing the meat in my mouth, my eyes wide, as my mind raced with possibilities, but before I could grasp onto any of them, I caught the slightest hint of a smile tugging at Valeria's impeccable face.

'She did something to the meal...!' I realised. But now, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place: Should I spit out the meat; the mythical ingredient that likely cost more than I

could make at Mr. Shori's stall in many months combined; and incur Valeria's wrath or continue eating the meat despite whatever addition she had added?

*'This is **definitely** a test, but what exactly is the correct solution?! If I continue to eat, despite my having realised that something was off, it would show her that I was willing to follow her every directive—definitely something she would undoubtedly value in an asset, I'd imagine. But if I stopped, got rid of the meat and spoke up, I would demonstrate knowledge beyond what Sera should normally have been able to possess, something that might similarly be valuable to her. I can explain it away by way of my apprenticeship with Mr. Shori having given me some culinary experience... I'd also demonstrate some backbone, something that was undoubtedly necessary in a corpo woman—the exact thing Valeria wants me to become,'* I thought feverishly, my entire body tensing up from the pressure of the situation.

'Which one does she value more...?! An asset or some kind of an heir?!'

Before I could make my decision, however, I heard Gabriel next to me noisily bring his fork to his lips, a sudden realisation dawned on me, and a chill coursed through my veins.

Valeria's slight smile, barely perceptible yet unmistakably there, was the giveaway.

'She's tampered with Gabriel's food as well... This isn't just a test for me!' The thought was a jolt to my system, propelling me into action for the sake of Gabriel, to whom I owed so much in this new life.

With a deftness I hoped appeared refined enough to meet Valeria's high standards, I swiftly yet delicately intercepted Gabriel's hand, pulling out the fork and meat before he could close his mouth.

"Sera, what—" he began, but a stern glance from me silenced him mid-sentence.

'Perhaps I truly am more like Valeria than I care to admit,' I mused internally, having to admit that Gabriel's recent comment hadn't been too far off the mark.

Realising the extent of my deviation from protocol, I knew there was no half-measure now.

I had to see this through.

Delicately, I used the napkin beside my plate to remove the uneaten meat from my mouth, ensuring my actions were as graceful as possible under the circumstances. Then, steeling myself, I raised my eyes to meet Valeria's.

Her unchanged smile was now accompanied by a slightly raised eyebrow, clearly signalling to me that I was treading on dangerously thin ice.

It was a moment of truth, and my next words had to be chosen with utmost care.

Summoning every ounce of Ego and tact I possessed, I steadied my voice as best I could and addressed Valeria with a mixture of caution and confidence. "Mother, I must express my deepest gratitude for this extraordinary meal, particularly for the rarity of the meat. However," I paused, choosing my next words with the utmost care, "during my recent apprenticeship

with Mr. Shori, I've developed a heightened sensitivity to culinary nuances. And, I couldn't help but notice an unusual element in the flavour profile of this dish. It's certainly intriguing, but it raises some potential concerns."

I glanced briefly at Gabriel, whose bewildered expression mirrored my own internal turmoil, before returning my focus to Valeria. Her expression remained unreadable, but the slight arch of her eyebrow hinted at a mixture of curiosity and challenge.

"I hope you don't perceive this as impertinence, but rather as a testament to the knowledge I've acquired and my commitment to directness and transparency, values that I believe are crucial in both family and corporate environments," I continued, hoping to maintain a balance between humility and assertiveness, that was more heavily leaning towards the first.

The room felt charged with a silent tension as I awaited Valeria's response, unsure if I had navigated her test successfully or stepped into a trap of my own making.

My heart pounded in my chest, but I held her gaze, showing no sign of backing down, fully knowing that I might have just made a huge mistake.

After what felt like an eternity to me, Valeria finally replied, her true feeling covered by an impassive, miniscule smile as always, "It seems that your recent incident has truly jolted you awake from whatever slumber you had been in before, daughter. It is most fortuitous to see indeed, that you have seemingly found yourself unable to continue your juvenile behaviour from before. You always were behaving way below your station and means..."

I was unable to fully grasp whatever it was that Valeria had just tried to tell me, *'Is... is that a compliment? What does that even mean?'*

Valeria then set aside her utensils and, with a gesture that seemed to defy the elegant simplicity of her attire, produced a tiny vial from seemingly nowhere. I couldn't help but marvel at the sleight of hand, briefly wondering where she could have concealed it. Her next words brought me back to the present with a jolt.

"You are indeed correct: Both your meal and Gabriel's were... *altered*."

At that, Oliver finally looked up, having enjoyed his luxurious meal up until that point as if nothing strange was happening around him at all. I truly envied him for his seemingly oblivious mindset. He spoke up, not having quite finished the bite in his mouth, which, if Gabriel or I had done so in Valeria's presence, would have likely ended with us being thrown off the top of the megabuilding itself.

"Is there a problem with the food, Val?" His tone carried a hint of concern, but it lacked the urgency that the situation, in my opinion, warranted.

Valeria's demeanour instantly softened as she turned to Oliver, her voice dripping with a honeyed tone reserved only for him. "Oh, nothing to fret about, my love. I was just implementing a little... corrective measure for our children. They've been somewhat lacking recently, you understand. I'm sure you wouldn't object to a bit of... educational intervention?" Her words, though laced with sweetness, carried an underlying chill that sent a shiver down my spine.

My heart pounded against my ribcage, my Ego Attribute straining to maintain my composure and keeping me from bolting out the apartment door at the revelations.

'Disappoint her?! What did I do wrong...? Where did I mess up...?! Corrective measures and education?!'

My faint glimmer of hope, kindled by Oliver's initial reaction, quickly fizzled out with his next words. "Ah, well, if they messed up somehow, then I definitely think teaching them about it is the right choice. You always were the more knowledgeable about the whole 'raising of children' thing between the two of us. I have the utmost confidence in your approach, my dear."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *'She is the more knowledgeable one about this?! What the fuck?!'* My mind was reeling with questions, such as, "How in the actual fuck did original Sera and Gabriel survive this long," if that was true?

"Thank you, darling," Valeria responded, her voice unusually tinged with genuine emotion. It seemed Oliver's affirmation had struck a chord, a rare glimpse of vulnerability in her otherwise impenetrable facade.

As Oliver blissfully resumed his meal, Valeria's icy gaze swung back to me and Gabriel, the brief interlude of warmth evaporating instantly. It was clear that our momentary respite had ended, and we were once again under her stern scrutiny.

Valeria's tone was measured yet laced with a distinct undercurrent of anger, her words precisely chosen and delivered with corporate-like precision and regality, underscored by a genuine displeasure. "Now, as for why I find myself deeply disappointed with you two, I had harboured the hope you would recognize and address your errors independently. Alas, it appears my expectations may have been overly optimistic," she remarked, her gaze piercingly fixed on us.

"Gabriel, specifically," she continued, her voice sharpening as she turned her attention to my brother, who visibly tensed under her scrutiny. "I am profoundly disenchanted, even downright *embarrassed* by your recent predicament. I have invested considerable resources to ensure your growth into a strong, capable individual, worthy of being my eldest. Yet, you tarnish my efforts so carelessly?"

Her words were like a chilling wind, cutting through the room with an almost tangible severity, reminiscent of an austere mediaeval monarch delivering a grim verdict. "If you had been ambushed by corporate rivals or even gang members, that could have been a different matter. But to be almost fatally injured by mere scavengers? The lowest rungs of our society, those barely able to lift themselves from the squalor they dwell in? And it is these wretches you heedlessly allowed to nearly end your life?"

She gestured broadly in my direction as she continued, "If not for your sister's remarkable recovery, you would have perished, rendering all my efforts, all my work for you, utterly futile. More distressingly, it would have assuredly saddened Oliver, deeply. Do you comprehend the gravity of my words, Gabriel? Such an incident must *never*, under any circumstances,

occur *ever* again." The finality in her tone as she stressed 'ever' resonated powerfully, echoing in my mind long after she had finished speaking.

As Valeria's regal and authoritative tone continued to command the room, her words were both celebratory and critical. "While today's meal is indeed a gesture of celebration for both your and your sister's recoveries, your recent actions have cast a shadow over this family's reputation. To address this failing and ensure you are better equipped to handle such situations in the future, I have arranged for you to commence training at the Arkion Dojo. You will attend four times a week for intensive physical conditioning and martial arts instruction. It is evident that your current state leaves much to be desired in terms of self-defence."

This revelation about the dojo instantly piqued my interest. *'A dojo...? That could be incredibly useful for me too, especially with my own plans involving the scavs...'* The thought sparked a glimmer of opportunity in my mind.

Emboldened by Valeria's earlier response to my initiative, I felt an unexpected surge of confidence. Seizing this newfound courage, I interjected without fully considering the potential consequences—a hesitation that, if given room, would likely have silenced me due to my overwhelming fear of Valeria.

"Mother, if you'll permit me," I began cautiously, aware that my words were teetering on the edge of Valeria's tolerance. The stern look she shot my way almost stopped my heart, but her silence seemed to grant me a reluctant permission to continue.

"Considering my own recent brush with mortality, and witnessing Gabriel's close encounter with death, I've realised the importance of self-defence. In the past few days, I've ventured outside our apartment, and each time, I've felt a concerning vulnerability. Access to self-defence training such as at the Arkion Dojo, even if it's just enough to fend off a lowly attacker or two, would be invaluable to me as well."

As I spoke, Valeria's expression remained an unreadable mask, giving away nothing of her thoughts. Desperate to leverage my request into something more appealing to her, I added a strategic point. "Moreover, as the daughter of a woman of your corporate stature, I believe it's prudent I learn to defend myself. There may come a time when I might be targeted by rival corporate entities as a means to get to you. This, surely, is a possibility we want to avoid. In lieu of these thoughts, would you permit me to accompany my brother to the Arkion Dojo?" My words were carefully chosen, hoping to strike a chord with Valeria's protective instincts and her corporate sensibilities.

In that instant, I silently praised my decision to choose the [Polyglot] Trait at the beginning of this journey. Its value had become crystal clear, especially in situations like these, where the right choice of words was crucial in navigating conversations with Valeria. Initially, I had thought the Trait's main benefit would lie in mastering foreign languages, but it turned out that its ability to match Valeria's sophisticated vernacular was just as vital.

This linguistic prowess gave me a distinct advantage, particularly when compared to Gabriel's experiences. Not once had I been reprimanded for my manner of speaking around her, a stark contrast to Gabriel's encounters. This, I hoped, was a positive indicator of my standing in her eyes.

Even despite that, however, being under her scrutinising gaze as a result of having spoken out of turn, I felt cold sweat run down my back as I anxiously awaited her answer...