

Chapter 67 - Praecantatio Resero

Utterly stunned by the System Notification urging me to make a decision for or against this new {Technique-Skill} I was being offered, I couldn't help but feel a wave of panic.

'Losing [Knives] would be a big blow if this new [{Anima Razor}] doesn't cover the same type of knowledge and muscle memory downloads. It's been my go-to option for self-defence so far, especially after I've just invested a decent amount of credits into those throwing knives...' I reflected, my mind racing.

The gamer in me was itching to accept the new "hidden" Skill without hesitation, but I knew the stakes were different here. This was my real life, after all, as much as I liked to game-ify things inside of my own head in order to try and stay somewhat sane throughout these insane couple of weeks so far.

As such, I could simply not afford to haphazardly throw away my best defensive Skill, should I walk into trouble that I couldn't simply evade or run away from.

'Maybe my progress with [Martial Arts] means [Knives] isn't as critical as it used to be... But losing it only to realise that the new Skill doesn't cover anything like it would still be a major loss,' I pondered, trying to rationalise a decision for one side or the other.

Yet, making an *informed* decision of any kind felt nearly impossible without more information.

The System didn't reveal what [{Anima Razor}] would actually entail in terms of knowledge or capabilities, much like it hadn't with any of my other Skills. And the name itself didn't give much away, except it implied something sharp; or at least I hoped that that was what the razor part referred to—and what even is "Anima"?

It sounded downright mystical, maybe spiritual or ancient, a term unfamiliar from my gaming days. While I knew the general concept of what "Anima" *could* be, as in, what it was used for in other games or literature, it didn't really help me in this situation here.

This was because just as with the whole concept of {Technique-Skills} in general, "Anima" wasn't something I recalled from any part of the Neon Dragons lore I had explored. I tried to recall any lore videos that might have mentioned something similar, but nothing came to mind.

Neon Dragons had become such a massive hit largely *because* it loved to twist and remix typical genre terminology, dressing old concepts in new skins. So, making assumptions about what "Anima" might refer to based on other games was likely a route to confusion rather than clarity.

This lack of familiarity, coupled with the high stakes of this decision, left me vastly more anxious than excited about the mysterious new path that had abruptly opened up before me.

With no solid information to work off of, I opted for my next best move: to gather any intel I could, usable or not.

"What, *exactly*, are you teaching me here, Mr. Shori? I've never seen anything like it," I ventured carefully, making sure not to mention specifics he hadn't introduced. It was always a delicate balance, trying to keep the System and its knowledge under wraps.

Mr. Shori paused, furrowing his brows in contemplation before exhaling sharply in frustration and beginning in his mother tongue, "{Haa, I cannot explain it in English. My vocabulary is not advanced enough, so Japanese will have to do... What I'm teaching you,}" he explained, "{is a technique passed down to me by my own Sensei many decades ago. He described it as a 'blade of the mind,' which really captures its essence quite aptly.

"{This technique, you could say, is a form of hyper-focused meditation. It demands a very specific mental state and intense concentration to master. But once you manage to consistently achieve this state, the potential is... frightening. And it's not just for cutting algae," he chuckled to himself at that, the imagery of his esteemed Sensei teaching him a secret technique simply to cut algae seemingly tickling just the right fancy for him.

"{To be quite honest, Ela, I barely understand it myself. My training was swift, with scant texts and sparse guidance from my Sensei. What I *do* understand is that it profoundly relies on the wielder's mental state and is immensely taxing both physically and mentally. However, the benefits in combat are unparalleled; it allows you to significantly extend the reach of your knives and enhance their lethality. Given your exceptional sharpening skills, I am somewhat apprehensive about the thought of teaching you this; but I feel like you are not going to become a murderer, simply because you could.}"

His eyes met mine as he spoke, conveying the deep trust he held for me.

It felt unusual to have someone articulate their expectations and trust so openly.

Yet, for the first time, I was assured in my response—there was no way I intended to misuse this technique for harm, especially after the harrowing experience of my accidental [Murder] unlock.

"{I absolutely have no intention of using it in that way; I promise you that, Mr. Shori,}" I responded earnestly. "{I truly appreciate your trust... Thank you. I can't fathom how I'll ever repay the debts I've accrued these past days, but I promise to try my best to meet your expectations.}"

It seemed only right to mirror his openness with my own sincerity.

While I wasn't ready to reveal the System to him, being honest about my feelings and the pressure to reciprocate his trust seemed appropriate given his faith in me.

Mr. Shori nodded, content, and slowly rose from the crate where he had been sitting. "{I am quite exhausted from the earlier demonstration, but considering we discussed the combat application of the technique, I think a basic demonstration is necessary—just so you understand what I'm trying to teach. This technique, devised by my Sensei, should only be used for self-defence; though, I admit it has not always been limited to such cases in my past... It is just as effective offensively, but you should *not* use it that way, Ela. Employ it only

in dire circumstances, and even then, be cautious about its use,}" he said, before grabbing one of the kitchen knives from a nearby rack.

I noted that the rack was the specific one that Mr. Shori had *specifically* asked me not to sharpen knives from in the backroom; meaning that this was likely a demonstration meant to show me what a typical kitchen knife could potentially be capable of, given enough experience with the {Technique-Skill}.

Stepping aside, unsure of what to expect, I watched Mr. Shori's demonstration intently, hoping to glean insights into what exactly the {Technique-Skill} might encompass based on his movements.

Mr. Shori closed his eyes, concentrating deeply, his body as still as a statue.

Then after a few moments and with a sudden, almost strangely dramatic opening of his eyes, I felt a palpable shift in the atmosphere.

The air in the backroom seemed to suddenly come alive, swirling violently towards the edge of his knife, creating what appeared to be an invisible blade that extended far beyond the physical knife. I could only see this phenomenon because the dust in the backroom, picked up by the air, formed a faint outline around this newly formed blade, making it look like a shortsword or maybe even a katana in length and size rather than a mere kitchen knife.

My eyes widened in surprise and disbelief.

I was so captivated by the spectacle that I dared not blink or consciously tried to school my dumbfounded expression—I couldn't miss a single instant of what was unfolding before me.

As the air settled, the invisible blade fully formed, Mr. Shori gently brought it down on a nearby crate.

The sound of metal shrieking and splitting filled the room as the invisible blade effortlessly sliced through the crate's solid exterior without any apparent effort from Mr. Shori—it was as if he had conjured an invisible vibro-blade from thin air.

'*That's... That's not possible!*' I thought, despite the undeniable reality unfolding before me.

This was something that, by all known rules of this world, should *not* be possible.

Neon Dragons had been a sci-fi cyberpunk story, incorporating mild fantasy elements like different races and alchemy, but magic had *never* been part of its universe. Not a single mention, lore element or history about the world in the videos I had watched about the game had even remotely hinted at something like this.

This right here, however, *was* magic.

There was no other way to put it; the spectacle in front of me defying any sort of other explanation.

Mr. Shori had somehow conjured an invisible, magical blade and sliced into one of the metal crates filled with our cooking supplies, meeting no resistance at all.

As quickly as the blade appeared, it vanished, and Mr. Shori slumped back onto the crate behind him, visibly exhausted from the effort.

I dashed over to steady him, my mind temporarily pushing aside the whirlwind of thoughts. "Mr. Shori! Are you okay?" I blurted out, concern lacing my voice.

He let out a rueful laugh mixed with a cough that sounded worryingly harsh. "I not young anymore... This technique, very exhausting. Can use in pinch, anything else... Simply too much," he explained.

Glad to hear that he was doing well enough to jest around, even though the cough brought up some serious questions about the state of his general health, I returned to the swirling whirlwind of thoughts inside my head; that much like the air swirling and rushing around the backroom just moments before, were wreaking absolute havoc.

'That... That was like magic... Or something akin to it. It doesn't really matter. Why is there magic? There shouldn't be magic?! I think...? Or do I even know if there should be magic? Why shouldn't there be magic...? I've never heard of magic in Neon Dragons before! What the fuck did I just witness?!'

My thoughts tumbled wildly, like clowns spilling out of a tiny car in an old comedy sketch.

It was only when Mr. Shori's warm, reassuring hand landed on my shoulder that I realised I was hyperventilating, struggling to process the inexplicable.

"Breathe calm, Ela," his soothing voice broke through the storm in my mind. "Is only natural reaction. Technique is unnatural; strange; confusing. Take time, breathe calm."

Guided by Mr. Shori's calming presence and my own Ego Attribute working to quell my panic, I managed to regain a sense of composure relatively quickly.

With a grateful nod to Mr. Shori, we both sat on our respective crates, breathing deeply, each recuperating in our own way from the profound revelations and exertions of the day.

'That was definitely magic, or some sort of it, at the very least,' I thought to myself with confidence.

*'That... Changes things, but I'm not sure what **exactly** quite yet. I really don't know anything about this new world, do I...?'* I continued to ponder with a growing sense of trepidation.

One thing it did clear up, however, was my decision on whether to accept the System's trade-off of losing a whole heap of Skills in favour of the {Technique Skill}.

There was no way I could pass up literal fucking **magic**, now that I knew it existed.

Conjuring up the System Interface again, I went back to the Notification which was still waiting for me to make a decision on.

'Alright, [Anima Razor], here goes nothing. Please let this be the right choice. I still need all the practical knowledge and muscle memory downloads related to knives that I can get. Please don't forget about those...!' I thought, hoping the trade-off would prove beneficial.

I confirmed the request as outlined by the Notification.

Immediately, a slew of System Notifications came rushing in.

[System]: [Knives] and [Blades] Skills have been permanently **discarded**.

[System]: [Sharpen] Perk has been **removed**.

[System]: [Anima Razor] Technique-Skill **unlocked**.

The moment the notification of unlocking the new Technique-Skill popped up, a major chime sounded inside my head, once again with a sound I had never heard before in my entire life—I was making a tremendous amount of System-related discoveries recently.

[System]: **Anima Attribute unlocked**. Adding Anima Attribute to stat-screen and User profile.

'What...?'

Before I could even process the implications of a new Attribute suddenly being added by the System, the slew of Notifications continued.

[System]: The following Skills and Perks are **locked** until [Anima Razor] is **discarded**: [Makeshift Blades] Skill, [???] Skill, [Bladed-Polearms] Perk, [???] Perk, [???] Perk, [???] Perk.]]

[System]: [Sharpen] Perk **added** to [Anima Razor] Perk Tree and **granted** for free.

[System]: 100xp gained for [Anima Razor] Technique-Skill.

Finally, the flood seemed to abruptly stop as the experience for the newly acquired Skill was divvied out.

Once it had ceased, my focus was entirely fixed on the line listing the new Attribute—Anima.

The implications of the sudden appearance of it were staggering and, arguably, even more world-shattering than the existence of whatever strange magic [Anima Razor] employed in this world.

Staring at the status screen, the reality of the new Attribute called 'Anima' made me question everything I thought I knew about this world and its rules. My fingers hesitated before I summoned the courage to tap the screen to open my profile.

[<-- Attributes -->]

Body 5: 300 / 5,000xp

Reflex 4: 2,500 / 4,000xp

Intellect 3: 1,400 / 3,000xp

Intuition 4: 100 / 4,000xp

Edge 3: 2,200 / 3,000xp

Tech 2: 1,000 / 2,000xp

Ego 4: 2,000 / 4000xp

Anima 0: 0 / 700xp

'It's... It's really there,' I thought, disbelief mingling with a growing, creeping sense of unease. *'How can there be eight Attributes...? There were only seven in the game. All the builds I know of are seven-Attribute ones; how is this possible?!*

The very idea that the System could simply add new Attributes was beyond frightening.

It felt like I had just had the rug pulled out from under me, sending me into a complete free-fall towards a never-ending abyss.

My entire life in this world so far had almost entirely been based off of my pre-existing knowledge of the game Neon Dragons; with only a few things here and there being different.

But even those things had made *sense*, such as the existence of more Skills or the way that some of the game mechanics had been incorporated into the real world such as with the Rest Function.

None of them had broken the fundamental rules of the world that I thought I knew; until now.

The revelation of an eighth Attribute threw open a floodgate of possibilities—was there a ninth or even a tenth? The boundaries of this System suddenly seemed limitless.

If it could just introduce something as significant as a new Attribute out of the blue, what was to stop it from adding more, or making even more radical changes to the world?

The idea that the System might possess near-omnipotent powers was unnerving.

It had already demonstrated its capability to alter reality, like when [Lightfoot] effortlessly erased my tracks and traces; even my very blood; from existence.

That power was staggering—what was to prevent it from deciding to erase something more significant, like a person?

Like *me*?

Was I just a passtime exercise for it?

Something to waste time with, like a bad round of Sims?

Had I actually died in my studio apartment and this was eternal limbo?

Or maybe even hell itself...?

I felt an abrupt tug in my thoughts as my Ego Attribute forcefully pulled me back out of the spiral of negative thoughts; pushing me back towards a more neutral state of mind. I could feel how desperately it had to work in order to keep me at an equilibrium with my thoughts, my mind continuing to want to spiral into complete nihilistic madness.

Trying to occupy my mind with just about anything else it could latch onto to help my Ego Attribute win this battle, I opened the Skill List; I wanted to see just what exactly [Anima Razor] would look like.

[<-- Skills -->]

[Meditation] Level 4 - 200 / 4,000xp (Intuition/Ego)

[First-Aid] Level 1 - 300 / 1,000xp (Intellect/Reflex)

[... ...]

[Martial Arts] Level 2 - 0 / 2,000xp (>Body/Reflex/Intuition<)

[Perform] Level 3 - 0 / 3,000xp (>Reflex/Intuition/Ego<)

[Anima Razor] Level 0 - 100 / 700xp (>Anima</Reflex/Intuition/Edge/Ego)

The attribute configuration in the interface immediately grabbed my attention, shimmering in a distinct colour unlike any other I'd encountered; much like [Perform], which had gotten the Combo-Skill colour treatment.

What really threw me for a loop, however, was the notation for its governing attributes.

'So... *It's primarily governed by Anima but also involves Reflex, Intuition, Edge, and Ego...? Five attributes?!*' The realisation stirred a concoction of confusion and thrill within me.

This excitement was kindled by the recognition of its potential significance, albeit slightly tempered by my recent disenchantment with the unpredictability of this world's rules.

If the typical Neon Dragons guidelines held any sway in this instance, then [Anima Razor] was an even bigger deal than I initially believed it to be; disregarding the whole "new Attribute" situation, of course.

The reason was as straightforward as it was tempting: Rare Skills in the game were governed by three Attributes each—like [Martial Arts] or [Appraise]. These Skills were notoriously challenging to level up due to their complexity but came with the bonus of offering unique abilities and perks.

However, Rare Skills weren't the only MAD (Multi-Attribute-Dependent) Skills.

Epic Skills, known for their rarity and almost mythical status just to acquire one, were governed by *four* attributes.

The only Epic Skill I knew of was [Netrunner], a Combo-Skill that, much like its name suggested, encompassed all netrunning-related Skills like [Netrunning], [Programming], [Quick-Hacks], and so on.

To my knowledge, no *individual* Skill carried the Epic tag in all of Neon Dragons, but this was likely due to my very limited exploration of the game's deeper mechanics. The fact that I even knew about [Netrunner] considering my very shallow knowledge of later-game unlocks suggested that other Epic Skills *had* to exist.

Given this line of reasoning, the implication that [Anima Razor] was influenced by *five* Attributes led me to a similarly logical as it was exciting conclusion:

It was a Legendary Skill.

While I was aware of the existence of Rare and Epic Skills in Neon Dragons, the concept of Legendary Skills felt more like a speculative leap made by the game's community than a documented fact.

No conclusive evidence of Legendary Skills had ever surfaced in the game discussions I had perused; yet, following the typical, age-old gaming rarity hierarchy—Common, Uncommon, Rare, Epic, and Legendary—it seemed like a logical endpoint for the ultimate rewards Neon Dragons might offer its most elite players.

That realm of the game was so far beyond my level of experience, however, that I couldn't be sure of its reality at all.

Additionally, [[Anima Razor](#)] seemed to somewhat diverge from how I imagined Legendary Skills would operate as well.

It wasn't exactly *governed* by all five Attributes, as for levelling purposes; it primarily depended on Anima. This was more akin to Common-rarity Skills, which were governed by a single Attribute, rather than the MAD complexity expected of higher rarity levels such as Rare or even Uncommon, aka. Restricted Skills.

'*Just what are you...?*' I pondered inwardly, grappling with the mysterious nature of this new Technique-Skill.

It seemed to echo elements of Neon Dragons that I recognized, yet each time I thought I had pinned down a familiar comparison, it deviated *just enough* to confuse me again at a fundamental level.

Despite the uncertainty, one thing was clear: I needed to explore this Skill further to grasp its full potential.

Turning back to Mr. Shori, I sought guidance, "So... How do I actually learn this technique? I'm at a loss here. Gripping the knife was painful, and I sensed it doing... something? I think. But that's *miles* away from conjuring the kind of magic you just demonstrated. How do I bridge the gap from 'Ouch, my wrist hurts' to 'invisible air-blade of super cutting', Mr. Shori?"

He chuckled at the way I had phrased my question, the warmth of it resonating through my body; pushing the nihilistic thoughts further away. Mr. Shori was definitely an anchor for me in this moment, one that I wouldn't trade for anything else in this world at the time.

Switching back to Japanese, likely due to his limited English vocabulary, Mr. Shori elaborated on the training regimen, "{First, we will focus on mastering the stance. This stance is crucial as it is the gateway to accessing the technique. It needs to become second nature to you, a reflex you can fall into instantly without thought, despite the discomfort it may cause.

"{Once you're comfortable with the stance, we'll move on to the air-blade technique. This technique isn't just about extending the reach of your blade either; it has other applications which we won't focus on now but I will teach you later if needed. Remember, however, the

primary aim is to enable you to *defend* yourself quickly and effectively when necessary. Nothing more}”

His tone carried a weight that underscored the seriousness of his instruction, making it clear that deviation from his guidance was not an option.

I nodded with resolve, fully comprehending the unspoken stipulation.

Misuse of this technique would lead to cessation of my training, a consequence I fully accepted.

Mr. Shori and I had a similar look out on life, it seemed; where self-defence was the only real use of violence and only as a last resort.

It was reassuring, in a way, to see that there were people in this world, as dystopian and cyberpunk as it was, that had made it to a ripe old age and continued to live with that mindset. It gave me a certain feeling of security that my path wasn't one of simple, downright childish, hubris and make-believe wishes; but one that might actually be viable.

Rising from the crate, I picked up the knife Mr. Shori had returned to the rack, opting for one that hadn't been enhanced by my [Sharpen] Perk—just in case. Using an unsharpened knife seemed a safer bet for now, especially if I accidentally activated the mysterious magic Mr. Shori had demonstrated.

Assuming the stance, I positioned myself where Mr. Shori could easily observe and guide me if necessary.

Surprisingly, the System seemed to have incorporated the initial stance as a sort of muscle-memory download with the Technique Skill's initial unlock; I didn't recall the exact finger placements or the precise angle and pressure needed, but my body intuitively aligned itself correctly anyway.

Almost instantly, the familiar burn in my wrists and the tendons of my fingers flared as I gripped the knife according to Mr. Shori's instruction.

The discomfort escalated quickly to the point where I wanted to release the knife, but I remembered Mr. Shori's earlier advice—quitting wasn't an option.

This technique could prove crucial, especially if I faced challenges that a Fixer might present in their requests. Mastering it might be essential before taking on my first real Task from one.

Depending on how the upcoming Operator meeting unfolded as well, demonstrating this unique ability might even secure a recommendation. Though I had no plans to flaunt Mr. Shori's secret technique casually, knowing it could provide a critical advantage compelled me to prepare thoroughly.

If demonstrating it became necessary to gain access to a Fixer, I wanted to ensure I was ready, rather than risk missing out on crucial opportunities after everything I had recently invested into getting that chance in the first place...