

Chapter 58 - Priorities

Tackling the [Accounting] Skill proved to be an endeavour filled with interruptions, as the doctor made his rounds to my room with the frequency of a worried parent, each time armed with a battery of questions and cognitive checks.

He was determined to ensure the newly installed cybernetic eye was syncing well with my system, and that the dojo's harsh regimen hadn't left any lasting scars; the latter potentially even being more important to him than the proper syncing of my eye, if his insistent checks on my wounds were anything to go by.

Thankfully, all systems were go, and roughly six hours after I initially blinked my eyes open in this high-tech infirmary, the doc gave me the green light for discharge.

"So, Miss Vildea," he began, clearly ready to wrap up my brief medical sojourn, "it appears your time under our care is concluding, provided you're feeling strong enough to leave. Would you like us to arrange some kind of transportation for you, or perhaps there's someone you'd prefer to call to pick you up?"

"I'm good to go," I curtly responded, choking back the automatic 'thank you' bubbling up. Had to keep up the façade of the entitled scion, after all; gratitude was probably not a currency they traded in, if the Neon Dragons' playthroughs I had watched were anything to go by. "Where are my clothes?"

Quick as a flash, the doctor gestured to the attendant who had earlier brought me the shards, the same young man, who then stepped out only to return in a flash with my attire, neatly folded and ready for my departure.

The doctor informed me with a courteous bow, "Your clothes have been meticulously cleaned and repaired by the specialists at Ether Labs. They are, I assure you, in pristine condition once again, Miss Vildea."

'Well, there goes my chance at nabbing some [Tailoring] experience... Not that I'm cut out for stitching and sewing, especially not on the dojo's high-end gear,' I mused internally, taking the clothes with an elegance I hardly felt.

Rising from the bed, I moved towards the exit, determined to make my departure as smooth and swift as a whisper. My aim? To slip away before the medical staff had time to dwell on the data-shards they'd lent me all snugly hidden by the chic fabric of the hospital gown or the one still nestled within my neck-slot.

"Appreciate all you've done," I offered, managing a polite bow.

It struck me that even a highborn might drop a thank-you here and there, right? Without further ado, I pivoted on my heel, striding through the doors as they parted for me, eager to leave the clinic's hallowed halls behind.

My heart was hammering against my chest like a drum solo, giving me that rush you'd imagine Danny Ocean felt mid-heist.

I was mentally chanting a mantra that could've been the chorus of a rebellious punk song as I did so: *'Don't call out for me. Don't ask me anything. Don't look at me.'*

It was my attempt at psyching myself into maintaining the casual swagger of someone who definitely hadn't just pocketed intel that didn't belong to me whatsoever.

Navigating the floor's corridors felt like tiptoeing through a maze designed by a particularly sadistic architect.

Unlike any other floor I'd explored in this behemoth of a building, this one had an unmistakably alien vibe. It was less "walking through a futuristic cityscape" and more "am I accidentally on board an alien spacecraft?"

The corridors were a study in claustrophobia, all narrow and dressed in shades of grey that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it. And speaking of light, there was this eerie glow *everywhere*, kind of like the soft luminescence of bioluminescent fish deep underwater, except there wasn't a single lightbulb or LED in sight to account for it.

As for doors or storefronts? Forget about it.

The place was as monotonous as a lecture on paint drying, *until it wasn't*.

Just when I'd resigned myself to the idea that this floor was just endless, featureless corridors, about thirty metres ahead of me, the wall itself suddenly split open.

No fanfare, no sound, just a section of the wall sliding apart like the entrance to a secret chamber in a spy movie. Out popped one of the floor's locals, moving with a purpose, before vanishing as quickly as they'd appeared.

I didn't even have time to recover from my surprise and get a good look at them, before they had already disappeared.

'This place is fucking creepy...' I couldn't help but think. While there was nothing particularly scary about it, the sheer strangeness of it all sent shivers down my spine at regular intervals.

Despite that, I kept up my meandering pace, weaving through the hallways with no real plan other than to avoid being predictable and getting to the closest elevators—which I actually knew the location of, as I had snagged a look at the floor's layout during my [Accounting] Skill-grind in the hospital earlier.

The young attendant had been kind enough to provide a copy of the basic floor plan, which was now displayed in the corner of my field of view, courtesy of my cybernetic eyes.

Throwing in a few random lefts and rights, I moved like I was trying to lose someone tailing me. Not that I expected the run-of-the-mill staff here to start a high-speed chase, but you know, playing it safe. Better to be the mysterious figure slipping unnoticed through the shadows than the clueless tourist caught on camera, right?

When I finally hit what felt like the home stretch, as I finally caught a glimpse of the characteristically black double-doors that indicated the entrance to the restricted elevators, a wave of giddy relief washed over me.

'Info-shards, get!' I couldn't help but mentally high-five myself, doing a quick pat-down to ensure none of the precious cargo had slipped from the confines of my gown. A quick inventory check confirmed they were all snug as bugs.

My grin was like a beacon, cutting through the spooky glow of the corridor with enough wattage to power a small concert. I quickly dashed the last few metres into the restricted elevator, hitting the button for my home floor with a bit more force than necessary.

Shaking off the residual weirdness like a dog coming in from the rain, I couldn't escape the feeling that the floor I'd just escaped was marinated in some high-grade corporate fog. It was like they'd pumped the air full of boredom, designed to dull your senses and keep you docile.

'If this is the cream of the crop lifestyle, then thank the stars Valeria's only got us playing dress-up for those bizarre family dinners, rather than actually living in a rockcrete snoozefest like that one.' The thought rolled around in my head as the elevator hummed downwards.

I had no idea what floor I had even been on, as there was no indicator for the actual number of floors I was on anywhere, but judging by the time it took the elevator to go back down to my home floor, I had been fairly high up.

'But maybe it was just this specific floor that's so off-putting...? It seemed like some kind of VIP hospital or secret research wing for Ether Labs, judging by the sneak peek I got. Maybe the other high-tier floors are more normal...'

The whole experience had felt like a preview of a life I was more than happy to skip out on...

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Rolling back into my apartment after more than a day's adventure felt like stepping into another world, especially when the clock on my interface cheerily informed me it was just past the stroke of noon.

The place was as quiet as a library after hours, confirming my guess that I'd have the run of it solo for a good eight hours more. That's assuming Oliver or Gabriel decided to grace the place with their presence tonight—Oliver, with his knack for turning "overtime" into an extreme sport, was a big question mark as per usual.

First order of business? Ditching the high-tech hospital gown.

As snazzy as it felt—and honestly, a bit too comfortable for something you'd wear in a medical facility—it wasn't exactly apartment chic. So, into something a bit more me and less sci-fi patient I hopped.

Next up on my task list: The info-shards.

"Under the bed sounds about right... Not like we're running a spy ring out of here or anything," I mumbled to myself. Tucking each shard into its own pair of socks—because why not make use of the sock drawer's mysterious ability to multiply everything but the sock you actually need—I stashed them in a box under the bed.

It was a sort of domestic espionage, hiding treasures in plain sight among the rogue laundry.

Flopping down on my bed, the familiar comfort of my own space wrapped around me like a warm hug. It was a stark contrast to the cold, impersonal vibe of the hospital floor. Here, the air was full of life, buzzing with the subtle, comforting notes of home—which might have been mould or something similar, considering the absolute state of the apartment before I had cleaned it up for my [Maid] Skill training.

It was the perfect backdrop to dive into reviewing my Skill gains for [Accounting], a moment of normalcy before figuring out how to spend the rest of my free hours. After all, with secrets stashed under my bed and a whole afternoon ahead of me, the possibilities seemed downright endless.

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

[System]: *[Accounting] has reached Level 2.*

[System]: *500xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

Slugging through the study marathon at the hospital, I actually managed to cram a ton of info into my brain, despite the doc's best efforts to turn my study session into an episode of "Interruptions Galore."

Sure, my ambitions had been sky-high at the start, but then came the inevitable distraction wave, followed closely by the boredom tsunami from looping through the same documents more times than I cared to count.

Yet, somehow, I had managed to rally time and again, diving back into the deep end of the info-shard pool without knowing if I'd even be able to sneak them past the hospital staff.

Reflecting on the ordeal, I couldn't help but think, *'Those seemingly endless hours of brain drain? Absolutely worth the XP boost.'*

The real game-changer was the knowledge dump I got about an hour before they cut me loose. That download was like hitting the jackpot in understanding the cryptic text I'd been wrestling with.

[Accounting] had quickly turned out to be more layered than an onion.

Going in, I thought it was all about crunching numbers and maybe some fancy bookkeeping.

But the more I dove into it, the more I realised it's got depth, nuances, and shades I hadn't even considered. While I still hadn't figured out how to make use of it for my day-to-day or apply my new-found knowledge to my actual life quite yet, each new level unlocked seemed to flick on a lightbulb, showing off just how versatile this Skill really could be.

“Note for future me: Figure out what the hell you want to do with [Accounting],” I muttered to myself, as I removed the info-shard from my neck-slot. I had almost forgotten it was in there, if it hadn’t been for the System’s Notifications reminding me of the study session.

With the administrative tasks done and the info-shard stored with the others, it was time to figure out what I should do for the rest of the day.

“Let’s see...”

Diving into the world of Skills, it was clear I had my work cut out for me—like, a mountain's worth of work.

Each of the 30 Skills I'd unlocked was waving at me, promising goodies and game-changers if I gave them some TLC.

Some were straight-up magic, tossing me knowledge and muscle-memory enhancements that felt like upgrading my brain and body's operating system. Others dangled the carrot of ridiculously cool Perks, the kind that could make a big difference in how I played the game of life.

The big question? Where to channel my focus.

Until now, my approach to Skill development had been... let's call it 'scattergun.' I'd been all over the place, trying to juggle levelling up a bit of everything, hoping to become some sort of jack-of-all-trades. But my recent crash course at the Arkion Dojo, and my recent near-death experience with the data-collection task, had thrown a serious wrench in that strategy.

It was a series of reality checks that came with bruises, a side of humility and the realisation that I wasn't as smart as I had initially thought.

After getting a taste of just how real the stakes could be—both courtesy of Kenzie's claws, and the officer's guns—it hit me that having access to this whole System thing didn't exactly slap an "invincible" sticker on my forehead.

Especially not when there were folks out there who could turn a single bad move into a visit to the ER, or worse. So, with that sobering thought, it was time to rethink my priorities.

Maybe, just maybe, spreading myself too thin wasn't the way to go after all.

So there I was, chin in hand, pondering the big question: *'What's it really gonna take to not just survive, but really thrive, **right now?**'*

The answer seemed to leap out at me—being able to defend myself was key, and not just with more equipment but with the know-how to use whatever was at my disposal effectively.

Enter [Martial Arts], my new best friend for the foreseeable future. Thanks to Miss K and the crash course at Arkion Dojo, I had a solid game plan for improvements on that front already lined up. Since training with her came with the sweet deal of the [Mentor Bonus], making

each session a goldmine for levelling up, I figured my solo practice time could be spent elsewhere.

That wasn't to say I was going to slack off on my fitness regime, of course.

If anything, my recent dive into system research promised to make those daily-morning sweat sessions even more productive. Boosting my Body Attribute wasn't just about looking good—though, of course, no complaints there either; for it had already paid off in spades during my scuffle with Kenzie.

I had never expected to be straight up stronger than a fox-girl with just my muscles alone, but then again, I had never expected to see a fox-girl in real-life to begin with, so maybe the point was moot altogether.

This Also meant doubling down on all the related Skills too, as I had been doing for the past few weeks. [Athletics], [Acrobatics] and the whole suite. Their Skill levels, as well as their Perks, were downright mandatory for anything I would likely end up doing in the future, so neglecting them was not an option either way.

On top of everything else, I still had to level up my netrunning skills. Paying back Gabriel wasn't going to happen by magic, and diving into the digital deep seemed like my golden ticket to racking up those credits.

Then there was also my stint at Mr. Shori's stall... Honestly, I wasn't sure beefing up my [Cooking] skill was going to do much more for me, but hanging out at that stall, away from the usual grind and in the company of the old man, had its own charm.

I'd toyed with the idea of ditching the whole gig, especially after the whole mess with "Aki"—every shift there was a reminder of her and her deception. But the thought of bailing on Mr. Shori after everything he did for me and vice-versa just felt wrong.

The man was innocent in the drama, after all.

As I mentally scrolled through the to-do list in my head—courtesy of that sneaky [Accounting] skill that was surprisingly already proving useful for organising my life beyond just numbers—I couldn't help but feel swamped.

'There's barely room to breathe if I wanna hit the hay using the Rest Function without turning into a zombie,' I mused, a tad overwhelmed.

But just going through the motions, ticking off boxes on my Skill list, wasn't going to cut it any longer. The last data-collection Task had been a wake-up call: I needed a game-changer, a trump card. Something that would not just inch me forward but catapult me into the fast lane.

The question was, what?

I finally had a eureka moment a few minutes later, when I realised, what I *really* needed was to rack up more Skill and Perk *Points*, specifically.

Grinding away at my current Skills felt like running on a treadmill—lots of effort and continuous progress, but I wasn't getting anywhere *fast*. It was this nagging sensation of lagging behind, even though I couldn't pinpoint who or what I was actually trailing behind. It's not like there was some leaderboard, but the feeling was there, gnawing at me.

But to bulk up on those points, I had to either up my Character Level or knock out some additional Tasks.

Tasks seemed like the golden ticket since they'd not only drop those sweet, sweet points but also boost my Character Experience—a solid win-win. But there-in lay the problem: Figuring out how the System decides to throw Tasks my way seemed downright impossible.

Up to now, I've snagged exactly two Tasks—one from Mr. Shori and another from Mr. Stirling.

Why the System had decided that their requests, specifically, would be classified as Tasks and reward extra things, while something like Valeria's request for me to do well in the Dojo had not, I had no idea about.

I didn't even know if I could have more than one Task active at a time, which was a consideration that had come up as a result of Valeria's request not having triggered a Task in my mind before, but something I hadn't really delved into, as I had been busy getting my face punched in by Kenzie.

Back when this was all a game, Quests—the game's version of Tasks—were a dime a dozen. You'd stumble upon them thanks to quest-giving NPCs, easy to track down with a little help from a wiki or a playthrough. Some Quest-NPCs were even hyped up in in-game flyers, pointing players right to them for their next adventure.

But this reality? It's like all those helpful hints and markers got left behind in the game world when this was all changed to be my new real life. I've been on the lookout, hoping to stumble upon some sort of sign or lead, but no dice so far.

It seemed like whatever System was at play here, it was not handing out Tasks with the same generosity—or at least not in any way that was immediately obvious to me.

Mulling it over, I figured the closest thing to a real-life Quest-NPC had to be a Fixer, right?

Looks like my future plans were about to get a serious fast-track if I wanted to kick things into higher gear.

In the simplest of terms, Fixers were like the middlemen of the adventure world.

They were the go-betweens, linking up clients with their requests to Operators ready for action. They'd gather all the intel, pick the right team for the job, and then handle all the money matters, smoothing out any wrinkles with the clients so the Operators could just focus on the mission.

Handy in all ways, except where they had a near-monopoly on requests, so if you had a falling out with a prominent Fixer, you'd likely be forced to switch areas.

The hitch in my plan with Fixers? I was missing two key ingredients: The credentials to even catch a Fixer's eye, and the faintest clue about how to find one.

While the latter could potentially be solved with some dedicated digging, the former was a bigger puzzle. Becoming an Operator wasn't as easy as signing up for a library card.

You needed to buy into the OPN—Operator Private Network—with a hefty fee and get an existing Operator to vouch for you.

Rounding up the Credits might be doable with some elbow grease, but convincing an established Operator to vouch for a fifteen-year-old girl? Yeah, that sounded like trying to scale a mountain in flip-flops.

That's why I had originally slotted it as a 'someday' goal, not something I was planning on tackling right now.

But if I wanted to start racking up Tasks quickly—and, by extension, those juicy Skill and Perk Points—getting into the Operator game seemed like my express lane.

Randomly bumping into Task opportunities like I did with Mr. Shori and Mr. Stirling wasn't exactly a strategy after all; it was luck.

And I couldn't bank on luck to keep my progress going at an accelerating pace.

While I wasn't entirely against the idea of simply grinding out my Skills for the foreseeable future, I had the strong suspicions that I wasn't going to get the opportunity to do so.

Between the whole Task conundrum, the "Aki" shenanigans, not to mention the training at the Dojo, and the Corporation theatrics kicking off outside my megabuilding, it felt like things were ramping up. Whether I liked it or not, I was smack in the middle of the action, or at least uncomfortably close to the edge of it.

As I pondered my next moves, an actionable game plan finally started to form. *'While I'm on the hunt for an Operator to back me, maybe I should laser-focus on Skills that would make a Fixer sit up and take notice...or better yet, catch the eye of a crew of Operators,'* I thought to myself.

It was a no-brainer, really.

Even though I was clueless about where to find my golden ticket into the OPN, beefing up on Skills that screamed 'valuable asset' seemed like a smart play. This way, I wasn't just biding my time; I was laying down the groundwork to make a splash, get noticed, and hopefully snag that much-needed vouch.

So, it was crystal clear now, which Skills I had to zone in on: Top of the list was anything netrunning related, because, let's face it, in this digital age, being a wizard online was pretty much gold.

Just taking the crew I faced during the data-collection Task as a perfect example, illustrated why it was important: There were a lot more mooks and gonks than there were netrunners,

meaning that a netrunning Operator would have a lot more options than one that didn't even know what a deck was, beyond a valuable piece of tech that could be sold.

Then, there was the up-close-and-personal combat stuff—getting cosy with [Knives], [Blades], or really any sharp or blunt object that can do some damage.

Can't forget about beefing up on dodging, ducking, dipping, diving, and...stealth. Yeah, basically turning into as much of a ninja as I could muster.

I had all of this mapped out in a spreadsheet right in my cerebral interface, thanks to my newfound buddy, [Accounting]. Turns out, it was surprisingly good at helping to organise things, even if it didn't directly involve numbers.

But, there was a large gap in my arsenal that was still nagging at me.

Thinking back to the data-collection task and where it had all gone wrong, there was a definite, clear issue with my current focus: Range.

Long-distance fights were going to be a thing at some stage, and all I've currently had were my good looks and sharp objects that I could lob at, admittedly, frightening speeds.

A gun would be the easiest thing to level the playing field with, but the idea of me, being a teenager, strutting around packing heat sounded like a one-way ticket to a whole heap of trouble.

While picking up a gun could be as easy as pie—assuming my Credits situation wasn't a total disaster—, it was not just about having it; it was the whole "carrying it around without getting into hot water" part that was tripping me up.

If the rules of the game world held any water here, I needed to figure out a smart, maybe less conspicuous way to arm myself for those just-in-case moments.

In the game, you found a lot of instances where scavengers and gangers were out to hunt down individuals with equipment they might need.

Their prime targets were, obviously, teenagers with guns.

They were too weak to put up any real fight and guns were universally useful for anyone trying to do just about any form of illicit activity.

You were a lot safer by wielding knives or even full-sized blades, as not many gangers nor scavengers really specialised in them; and if they did, they would want to use their own custom weapons anyway.

They were a lot less universally applicable than guns were.

So if I intended to get a firearm, I'd have to think about a seriously good way to permanently hide the fact that I was packing, lest I invite a lot of unwanted attention to my sorry self.

'Maybe a shooting range would be the best first order of business...' I ultimately had to concede.

Before even thinking about getting a gun, I'd need to learn how to properly use one first. Otherwise I'd absolutely be wasting my Credits on one, not even thinking about the whole "how to conceal it from everyone, at all times" bit.

I jotted down "Search for a shooting range," as a semi-top priority for now, deciding to circle back to the topic of a firearm at a later stage.

For now, I had my work cut out for me: More Skill grinding. Or about as much as I could stomach without going insane, of course.

I was going back to Mr. Shori's the next morning, I had decided, so my usual routine was about to resume, albeit with a newfound focus on what I specifically wanted to achieve with my daily grind.

Operation "Become an Operator" was now officially at the top of my list, with subgoals to repay my debt to Gabriel and similar things marked in red on it as well.

It was high time to finally start working hard on unlocking the first real quest NPC in this world...