

Chapter 40 - Unexpected Progress

Back in the apartment, I immediately headed towards my room to get changed and figure out what I was going to do with the rewards for the Task.

'Let's see here...' I thought to myself, as I navigated the [Task] screen and claimed the rewards for [Mr. Stirling's Request (First Data Collection)]. Just like last time, the [Skills] interface popped up immediately, urging me to spend the free Skill Point before letting me move on.

[System]: 250xp gained.

[System]: 1 Skill Point gained. Skill interface will automatically open to distribute excess points.

'Alright, then. I have a ton of options, but I should be more utilitarian with my choice this time around. Last time, I simply chose whatever was going to give me the most experience, but considering how rare Skill Points seem to be so far, I should instead be considering which Skills are the hardest to level for me right now and go for those,' I argued while scrutinising the list.

[<-- Skills - 1 Unspent Skill Point(s) available -->]

[Meditation] Level 4 - 0 / 4,000xp (Intuition/Ego)

[First-Aid] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (Intellect/Reflex)

[Juggling] Level 3 - 400 / 3,000xp (Reflex)

[Blades] Level 1 - 0 / 1,000xp (Body/Reflex)

[Throwing] Level 4 - 0 / 4,000xp (Reflex)

[Knives] Level 3 - 800 / 3,000xp (Reflex)

[Programming] Level 2 - 1,100 / 2,000xp (Intellect)

[Netrunning] Level 1 - 400 / 1,000xp (Intellect)

[Manifestation] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (Intellect/Intuition)

[Cooking] Level 2 - 700 / 2,000xp (Intuition/Tech)

[Slicing] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (>Intellect/Reflex<)

[Maid] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (Body/Intuition)

[Stealth] Level 2 - 1,600 / 2,000xp (Edge)

[Athletics] Level 2 - 1,500 / 2,000xp (Body)

[Contortion] Level 0 - 100 / 700xp (>Body/Reflex<)

[Acrobatics] Level 1 - 0 / 1,000xp (Body/Edge)

[Poison] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (Edge/Tech)

[Deception] Level 0 - 400 / 700xp (>Edge/Ego<)

[Appraise] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Intuition/Tech/Intellect<)

[Negotiation] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Ego/Intuition<)

As I scrutinised my Skill list, a clear distinction emerged between those integrated into my daily routines and those that languished, undeveloped, at level 0. The former group mostly hovered around levels 2 or 3, thanks to my regular exercises and stints at Mr. Shori's, as well as the SPG-01 shard providing me with netrunning lessons, while the latter remained stagnant.

'Choosing wisely is key here,' I contemplated, focusing on the Skills that seemed beyond my current reach. 'If I want to maximise the impact of this Skill Point, I should target a level 0 Skill. Even if it will only give me a minimal amount of experience points, getting a single level in them could help kickstart those seemingly untrainable Skills. The knowledge downloads would undoubtedly help me figure out how to incorporate them into my routine or train them in general...'

The Skills at level 0 that caught my eye were [First-Aid], [Manifestation], [Slicing], [Maid], [Poison], [Deception], and [Appraise]. Each of these Skills had its unique allure, but my current predicament with Mr. Stirling's tasks required a more immediate, practical benefit.

[Appraise], with its enticing [Appraisal] Ability, was certainly on my radar for future investment, but for now, it was essential to prioritise Skills that would aid me in the imminent tasks. Thus, [Appraise] and [Manifestation], the latter being relevant primarily to netrunning, were promptly sidelined in favour of Skills that promised more immediate utility and applicable bonuses in my current assignments.

[Manifestation] was a complete unknown, as I had no idea what it might be used for. It hadn't existed in the game, much like [Maid], [Slicing] or [Juggling]. As a result, I was hesitant to "waste" a Skill Point on it, just to get a rough idea of what it might do. All I knew was that it had something to do with cyberspace, which was unlikely to provide any immediate benefits to me right now.

It was undoubtedly going to be part of one of the programming guides on either the SPG-01 shard or subsequent ones anyway, meaning that it wasn't going to be a hard-stuck Skill like some of the others were right now.

Then there were the [Maid] and [Poison] Skills, both of which presented themselves as intriguing wild cards. The [Poison] Skill, in particular, was intriguingly distinct from its game counterpart. Unlike the game where it was more straightforward, here it involved some sort of resistance element, I assumed, and awarded experience for exposure, suggesting a depth and versatility that hadn't existed in the original game's version of the Skill.

As for [Maid], while my curiosity about its Perk-Tree was undoubtedly high, it didn't seem immediately relevant to my current missions. It seemed like a Skill that I could develop with some dedicated effort as well, primarily involving cleaning and maintaining order, which didn't require any special circumstances to train to begin with.

Faced with the challenging decision of choosing between the last three remaining Skills, [First-Aid], [Slicing], and [Deception], I weighed their respective benefits carefully.

Each Skill presented its own unique advantages, particularly in the context of the tasks Mr. Stirling had assigned me.

[First-Aid] was an obvious choice for practical reasons; it would be invaluable if I sustained any injuries. Its utility in a world as unpredictable as this one was undeniable.

Similarly, [Slicing] seemed to be a more advanced form of injury management, potentially vital if I found myself in a situation with more severe wounds.

Then there was [Deception], a skill that appealed to the more strategic part of my mind.

It promised the ability to navigate tricky situations with a bit more guile and finesse, something I definitely felt like I could use right about now. The thought of being able to manipulate scenarios to my advantage was tempting, especially considering the nature of the covert tasks ahead.

The fear of missing out on the benefits of the other Skills nagged at me, however, making the decision all the more difficult.

'If only I could distribute a single Skill Point among all three,' I mused, half-jokingly, to the unresponsive System. But deep down, I knew I had to commit to just one choice.

What would be the most prudent and immediately beneficial Skill to enhance at this critical juncture? The decision weighed heavily on me, as I pondered my options carefully.

Amidst the three compelling choices, [Slicing] stood out as the most challenging Skill to level up through regular means. I contemplated the notion of training for [Slicing], yet the pathway to its mastery seemed clouded in mystery.

It was a Skill that, with my current knowledge and experience, I couldn't fathom a straightforward method to practise or improve, especially considering its complexity and depth. My brief observation of Dr. Maltrick's work, while insightful during Gabriel's treatment, wasn't a feasible or sustainable means to learn [Slicing] as a whole.

The decision ultimately hinged on two pivotal considerations: The practical use of the Skill and the inherent difficulty in levelling it up.

[Slicing], with its implications of handling severe injuries, appeared to be a critical Skill, potentially lifesaving in dire circumstances. The utility it could offer in the unpredictable scenarios I might face, especially given the nature of Mr. Stirling's assignments, was invaluable. Moreover, the inherent challenge in acquiring and developing this Skill independently made it an ideal candidate for the use of the Skill Point.

With these factors in mind, I resolved to allocate my Skill Point to [Slicing].

I hoped that this investment would not only provide me with immediate benefits in handling critical injuries, drawing from Dr. Maltrick's expertise, but also pave the way for me to gain experience in this field on my own going forward.

After all, relying on encounters with professional Slicers for training was not a viable long-term strategy at all.

"[Slicing] it is. There's no logical other choice I should go for right now..." I voiced my thoughts out loud, making sure that my gut-feeling was not rebelling at it, which it didn't.

With a quick allocation and confirmation, I locked in my choice for [Slicing] to get the Skill Point applied.

[System]: 1 Skill Point(s) applied to [Slicing] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Slicing] Skill.

[System]: [Slicing] has reached level 1.

The moment I allocated the Skill Point to [Slicing], a surge of information flooded into my consciousness. It was as if a dam had burst, unleashing a torrent of intricate details about human anatomy and emergency medical procedures. My mind absorbed the knowledge at an astonishing rate, each new piece of information fitting seamlessly into place.

The basics of human anatomy were laid out before me in meticulous detail.

I gained a comprehensive understanding of the body's structure, the interplay of muscles and bones, the delicate network of nerves, and the vital pathways of blood vessels. It was like having a detailed map of the human body imprinted in my mind, each organ, muscle, and bone clear and distinct, yet I could tell that there was so, so much more that hadn't even been touched.

I learned the essentials of suturing and stitching wounds next.

The System provided me with various techniques for closing wounds efficiently and effectively, from simple cuts to more complex lacerations. I understood the importance of minimising tissue damage and proper procedures for promoting healing, the choice of suture materials, and the methods to ensure sterility and prevent infection.

Removing foreign entities from wounds was another critical aspect covered at the same time.

I learned how to safely and swiftly extract shrapnel, bullets, and other objects embedded in flesh, minimising further injury and preparing the wound for proper healing. This knowledge was going to be undoubtedly vital for field emergencies, where immediate medical attention was often the difference between life and death.

Something like Gabe's injury, I could likely stitch up now and prevent any immediate blood loss. While internal injuries were still very much beyond me, at least he wouldn't immediately bleed out, should something similar happen again.

Lastly, the System introduced me to the rudiments of interfacing with cybernetic enhancements. This part of the knowledge was extremely basic, focusing on the fundamental concepts of how cybernetics connect with the human nervous system.

While it wasn't enough to perform complex cybernetic surgeries, it provided me with an understanding of how to potentially disconnect a simple cybernetic limb without causing too much irreparable harm to either the technology or the body in question.

The entire download was like a crash course in emergency field medicine, tailored for situations where time and resources were limited.

It was, quite honestly, overwhelming to the point that it easily rivalled the level of knowledge I had gained from [Cooking] and [Programming] alike. I was glad to be lying on my bed, for I

definitely knew I would not have been able to stay standing amidst the torrent of information crashing into my brain.

Overwhelmed yet invigorated by the sudden influx of knowledge from the System, I couldn't help but feel a mix of astonishment and gratitude.

'This is incredible,' I thought. *'The speed at which I'm absorbing this information is just unreal.'* Normally, acquiring such medical knowledge would require months, if not years of dedicated study and practice, but here I was, gaining a foundational understanding in mere moments.

Despite the overwhelming nature of the information, I was acutely aware of the advantages it presented. *'Now I have the means to actually gain experience for [Slicing] in practical situations,'* I reflected. The thought of needing a serious injury to level up the skill was not exactly comforting, but it underscored the real-world applicability of what I had just learned.

'It's a grim thought, hoping for injuries, but at least I'm more prepared for them now,' I reasoned.

My thoughts then shifted to the possibility of extracting cybernetics from defeated enemies going forward. It was something that was quite common practice in the game itself, but it was likely going to be quite different in real-life.

The idea of scavenging cybernetics from scavengers was not only a potential means of levelling up my [Slicing] skill but also a way to possibly earn extra credits.

'Even basic Tier 0 cybernetics could be of value,' I considered. These entry-level augmentations were standard for many civilians, so there would always be some market for them, even if they were not the most advanced or valuable.

This line of thought, however, brought back memories of Gabe's injury, igniting a spark of anger and determination within me. *'If I encounter those responsible again, I'll be ready,'* I promised myself. The idea of turning my revenge into an opportunity for both Skill development and financial gain was a silver lining in an otherwise dangerous and volatile environment.

I took a moment to steady myself, feeling both equipped and empowered by the System's capabilities that it continued to provide. *'I'm truly blessed to have this System,'* I acknowledged with a bit of self-reflection, *'It's a game-changer in every sense...'*

Finishing up my administrative duties for the day, I closed all the System interfaces and considered what I should be working on for the rest of the day.

The completion of the first data collection task for Mr. Stirling had gone much smoother and quicker than I'd anticipated, leaving me with an unexpected surplus of free time.

As I pondered how best to utilise this rare opportunity, my thoughts naturally drifted towards Skill development. I re-scanned my Skills list, considering which ones might provide the most immediate benefit for my upcoming missions.

I quickly realised that none of the Skills directly relevant to Mr. Stirling's missions were close enough to level up to make a difference in the short term. However, [First-Aid] caught my eye. It was tantalisingly close to achieving the first level, which would undoubtedly unlock some vital knowledge, one way or another.

Only 100xp was needed, and I found myself contemplating a somewhat drastic course of action to bridge this gap. *'I can probably sneak out 100xp over the rest of the day... Just need a wound,'* I mused, while idly touching the RaZ near me. *'I can definitely do that.'*

Unwilling to waste much of the rare free-time I had managed to sneak out thanks to the quick and easy delivery mission, I used the freshly sharpened RaZ and cut a few wounds into my upper thighs with practised ease.

I knew that this was the least likely place to be seen by anyone that I wouldn't want to see.

A rush of the familiar piercing and stinging pain made itself known, heightening my senses, accelerating my heartbeat and giving me a feeling of strange euphoria the moment the initial pain ebbed away. Some parts of it dangerously reminded me of the agony I had just endured the earlier day courtesy of the NeuroCorpse.

A certain part of me urged me to continue, to inflict more wounds, but I quickly drowned it out. *'That's more than enough, Sera! Keep your shit together. You're long past this. It's purely for experience, nothing else,'* I reminded myself intently, forcibly putting away the freshly bloodied RaZ. *'It cut really nicely though, I do have to say... [Sharpen] has really done some amazing work on the durasteel.'*

Reflecting on it, a sense of solemnity washed over me.

I recognized the need for greater caution if I were to repeat such methods for gaining experience in the future. In my past life, despite some severe hardships early on, I had battled and subdued many inner demons.

However, it had long become evident that these demons were never truly vanquished, merely dormant. I hadn't expected this issue to crop up again at this time, but I also understood why it had happened, the moment it did.

The unsettling experience with NeuroCorpse the prior day had seemingly shattered a mental barrier I had painstakingly built over the years. This barrier had been my defence, keeping the darker thoughts and impulses at a safe distance.

But the moment I pressed the blade of the RaZ against my skin, a chilling realisation struck me—I was treading on dangerous ground. The demons of my past, which I had so fervently hoped were extinguished, were lurking just beneath the surface, as real and threatening as ever. It was a stark reminder that I couldn't afford to let my guard down; the battle against these demons was ongoing, and I needed to stay vigilant, regardless of whether I was in Sera's body or my own.

Applying some rudimentary first-aid, using a new can of spray-bandage that Gabe had acquired the previous day from his workplace, I decided to put the issue out of my mind for now. *'Just gonna let this heal up for the next few hours, then clean the wound, re-dress it*

and hope that's enough for an experience drop,' I internally planned, before laying back down on the bed.

I closed my eyes for a few moments, taking a few deep breaths, trying to calm my rapidly beating heart. *'Fuck...'* I cursed internally, *'What are you doing, Sera? Keep yourself together. It's a whole new world, a whole new body, a whole new situation... You've got a System, you're not alone, because you have a family—as strange and sadistic as some of their members are—and you're as safe as one could ask for in a cyberpunk world as a result. Just... keep it together.'*

I took a few more minutes of time to do a quick session of [Meditation], the 4th level that I had recently acquired, helping me to centre my thoughts and calm my beating heart, as well as purge some of the adrenaline from my system.

Once I felt like I was mostly functional again, I decided to take it easy for the rest of the day and plugged in the SPG-01 shard into my neck slot, removing the restricted access shard that I had just realised was still inside.

'I wonder what I should do with this one...? I'll just give it back to Mr. Stirling when I next see him, I guess,' I thought, before putting it into one of the pockets of my Operator-outfit nearby.

Activating the SPG-01 shard, I dove back into my own private cyberspace to continue my lessons with Kill Joy about [Programming] and [Netrunning] for the next few hours.

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By the time the rigorous lesson with Kill Joy wrapped up after several intensive hours, I could feel my mental energy waning. Today's session had been particularly challenging, suggesting I was nearing the completion of the initial guided lesson.

Reflecting on the rich content of the SPG-01 shard, I once again felt severely grateful for Gabriel's investment. *'This shard's knowledge is invaluable. I owe you big time, Gabe. I'll make the most of it and find a way to repay you soon, I promise,'* I thought, disconnecting from cyberspace and returning to the reality of my bedroom.

Curious about my progress, I checked the accumulated System Notifications, eager to see the fruits of my labour:

[System]: 500xp gained for [Programming] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

Seeing the numbers, I couldn't help but smile. *'Another session like this and I'll unlock my first [Programming] Perk... That's going to be exceptionally handy going forward! I'll have to consider which one to go for fairly soon, then,'* I mused, my mind filled with anticipation and excitement.

Perks were truly the most amazing part of the System to me. They granted a specific capability in an instant, that would otherwise likely take an entire other Skill to master.

It made sense that they were the hardest to acquire from normal level ups too, as a result.

'I'll also have to unlock [Quick-Hacks] soon... They should be part of the second guided lesson from Kill Joy, so I'll probably just wait for that, but I can't lose my goals out of my sight: Becoming a somewhat capable runner. It's the easiest way to make some quick creds and repay Gabe.'

After carefully placing the SPG-01 shard back in its case and hiding spot, I stood up from my bed, taking a moment to stretch and reawaken my muscles after the prolonged period of stillness during my dive into cyberspace. My thoughts were clear, focused on the task ahead. "Time to check those cuts," I murmured, heading to the bathroom with the spray-can in hand.

Removing the spray bandages and washing the cuts, I felt a rush of memories threaten to crash down upon me. It was something I had done many, many times in another life and the motions felt uncomfortably familiar, despite the different circumstances. *'Stay focused, Sera. Just the experience. That's **all** this is for,'* I reminded myself, as I carefully applied another patch of the spray bandages on the freshly cleaned cuts.

No sooner had I finished than the sound of a System notification chimed in my head, signalling a Skill level up. A wave of relief washed over me, a tangible reward for the effort and a reminder of the progress I was making.

[System]: *200xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.*

[System]: *[First-Aid] has reached level 1.*

Immediately, I felt the G.E.M.A. System's knowledge flood my mind.

It was like flipping through a detailed textbook, with each page bringing a new understanding.

The first module covered the ABCs of first aid: Airway, Breathing, and Circulation.

I learned how to assess if a person's airway was blocked and the steps to clear it, ensuring oxygen could flow freely. Techniques like the head-tilt-chin-lift manoeuvre were now clear and instinctual, their movements ingrained in my muscle-memory as if I had done them countless times before.

Breathing techniques were next.

I grasped the fundamentals of checking for normal breathing, using rescue breaths when necessary, and the importance of keeping a person's breathing at an even timbre during respiratory distress.

The third module dealt with circulation, highlighting the significance of controlling bleeding, recognizing the signs of shock, and the proper application of pressure to slow blood loss.

Wound care formed a significant part of the download.

I learned about cleaning and dressing various types of cuts, understanding the difference between a scrape, a laceration, and a puncture wound, as well as the differences when it

came to dealing with them. The System detailed how to clean a wound with mild soap, disinfectant and water, as well as other, Neon Dragons-specific anti-infection agents, apply an antibiotic ointment, and dress it properly to avoid infections after the fact.

Managing bruises and sprains was another essential aspect.

The R.I.C.E. method (Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation) was now second nature to me, along with the knowledge of when to apply cold or warm compresses to injuries.

Bandaging techniques varied from simple to complex, including how to create a sling for arm injuries and how to wrap sprained ankles or wrists for added support.

It also dealt with more cyberpunk-specific issues that no first-aid class of my previous life would have ever considered, such as cybernetic malfunctions that affected the nervous system and how to disable them, should it lead to an emergency.

Lastly, the System touched upon the initial management of common emergencies like choking, fainting, and burns. For each scenario, it provided a step-by-step approach: From assessment to the immediate response required.

Though basic, the knowledge was frighteningly comprehensive and laid a solid foundation for dealing with a variety of common injuries and emergencies, equipping me with the confidence to handle minor medical issues.

Coupled with the recent acquisition of knowledge from the [Slicing] Skill, I found myself unexpectedly well-equipped to handle emergency treatments. The combination of these two skill sets had significantly bolstered my confidence in managing urgent medical situations, should they unexpectedly present themselves.

I found myself sprawled out on the grimy floor of the bathroom a few moments later, my head still spinning as if I had woken up with a bad cold.

“Ugghhh,” a groan escaped me, as I sat back up, leaning my back against the door.

“Definitely overdid it today in the mental department, didn’t I...?” I muttered, before applying a cold, wet towel to my forehead. The splitting headache that had manifested quickly eased up as the coldness seemed to sap its energy, granting a small bit of relief.

I vowed to take it a bit more slowly with major first-level knowledge downloads in the future, not wanting to go through something like this again, if it could be avoided. Yet, I couldn’t help but be satisfied with the day’s exceptional progress.

‘[Slicing] and [First-Aid] at level 1 is a massive step forward... If anything happens to Gabe or me, I can now make sure that we don’t just bleed out immediately. I’ll need to improve on both to really get a grasp on emergency treatment, but for now, it definitely provides a safety net that I find difficult not to be happy with for now,’ I mused, a sense of well placed accomplishment radiating through me.

Feeling invigorated by my recent skill advancements, I contemplated my next steps.

"Maybe there's something productive I can do with the remaining hours of the day," I thought, reclining on my bed.

However, it quickly became apparent that my brain, taxed from the intensive knowledge downloads, was in no state for further exertion. A splitting headache had made any further activities seem impossible.

"Perhaps resting is the best course of action for now," I conceded to myself, feeling the throbbing pain in my head intensify with every passing moment. The apartment was still devoid of Gabriel and Oliver's presence as well, leaving me in a quiet solitude that seemed ideal for rest.

Despite the discomfort, I decided not to let the remaining hours slip by unproductively.

With [Meditation] having reached level 4, it offered a perfect opportunity to work on once again enhancing my Intuition and Ego without straining my already overworked mind.

'No sense in wasting this valuable time,' I thought, managing a smile through the pain.

Settling into a comfortable position, I closed my eyes and began the familiar rhythmic breathing of meditation. Surprisingly, despite the headache, I found myself easily slipping into a tranquil meditative state for the rest of the evening...