

Chapter 81 - Anomaly

On my way back home, I pulled up the information package that Mr. Stirling had provided alongside the message; I might as well get a look at what he wanted me to do this time around.

I was a bit nervous and hesitant about another data collection, considering how horrendously bad the last one had gone, but I pushed aside those feelings for now.

If I intended to become an Operator anytime soon, I couldn't let missteps colour my decisions like this. Mistakes were bound to happen along the way—learning how to deal with them, and preferably not die, was going to be a large part of what I'd need to get used to as one.

This time around, the information package included quite a lot of images, in addition to the usual text-based rundown.

I had them arrayed around the edges of my vision, making sure I could still walk straight through the corridors of the 43rd floor, and kept the text rundown on the right side to cross-reference with.

'I feel like one of those super-hackers from all the cringey movies and shows back in my old life,' I couldn't help but think with a chuckle. *'I have become the cringe.'*

Focusing back on the information itself, I started getting a clearer picture of what Mr. Stirling had prepared for me, and I grimaced slightly.

'Golden Phoenix and Red Snakes floor, huh?' I thought with a bit of trepidation.

The data collection would take place on a "neutral" floor, as Mr. Stirling had put it in the text file; but that only meant "neutral" in the sense of his personal agenda between EtherLabs and Falkum Industries.

Considering my not-so-insignificant run-ins with the Clawed Beasts thanks to Mr. Shori's original request and the subsequent encounters with Jade and Vega, I had a feeling that going to a floor completely owned by their rival gangs wasn't going to be a smart idea.

While I wasn't exactly a known quantity by any stretch and didn't officially belong to the Clawed Beasts—'cause, honestly, fuck gang politics and everything they stood for—there was a non-zero chance that I might have been seen by a member of the rival gangs at some stage in the past when I interacted with members of the Clawed Beasts.

Especially since I literally worked at Mr. Shori's place almost every day and the stall had very openly and firmly changed hands from the Red Snakes to the Clawed Beasts, I'd have to make sure to tread lightly when I went to fulfil this task.

Speaking of which, I quickly pulled up my Task interface to check and, lo and behold, there was a new Task waiting for me, as expected.

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

[Description: *Collect and deliver the data to Mr. Stirling from floor 38 of the Delta Mega Building. 0/1 Data Collected. Time Limit: 36:24:22.*]

[Reward: *150 Character Experience + 1 General Skill Point*]

I was slightly surprised to see that the character experience rewards had gone up by 50, but I wasn't one to complain about extra benefits. Everything else seemed to be about the same, so I went back to perusing the rest of the information package.

Mr. Stirling had apparently chosen the drop-off point himself, the attached pictures showing a delivery box in front of one of the shops on the floor called "Salt 'N' Guns," a weapon's dealer that apparently owed Mr. Stirling a favour or two and had agreed to host the exchange via its delivery box.

While the owner wouldn't exactly come out to save anyone involved in the trade, the simple fact that it was going to be in a fairly "public-ish" setting, compared to the dead alley the last one had happened in, caused a big sigh of relief.

It was unlikely that a group of Operators would cause much of a scene right in front of a weapon's store, especially if they were practically stealing from the shop in question by accessing their delivery box.

Mr. Stirling's information package included a few phrases that had been agreed upon by the store owner to help me out in a pinch, should somebody question why I was accessing the delivery box or if I ended up having to seek a quick refuge within the shop; which was very much appreciated.

I was half-inclined to thank him ahead of time, but then remembered some of the words of wisdom he had imparted upon me the last time we spoke.

'It is technically his job to make sure the data collection goes smoothly for everyone involved, so thanking him for something like this isn't actually the Operator's way,' I reminded myself.

It felt odd to think about not thanking someone when they had clearly gone out of their way to prepare a safer route for you, but then again, that was kind of expected for a Fixer—which Mr. Stirling technically was in this case.

I only realised what I had thought a moment later and stopped dead in my tracks.

'Wait a minute... Is this technically Operator work right now?'

It had all the hallmarks of it, now that I actually spent a moment to think about it.

I had a Fixer in Mr. Stirling, who gave me Tasks and information packages to go along with them.

I had clearly defined goals and got paid upon completion.

No matter how I sliced it, this was definitely Operator-like work.

'Is Mr. Stirling doing that on purpose or is this just how things are handled...?' I thought to myself, feeling a bit out of my depth, considering my relative inexperience with this world's more minute traditions and ways.

It made sense for Operators to be set up in the way that they are, both from a logical in-world perspective, as well as the perspective from this all having been a game once upon a time.

Bounty hunts, data collections, and whatever else a given person needed doing naturally had the rough hallmarks of this exact setup: Request, Information, Rewards.

Without the request, no Task would be created.

Without information, nothing could be done about the Task.

Without a reward, nobody would ever consider filling the Task in the first place.

So the real question was just *how far* Mr. Stirling's Tasks went down the Operator/Fixer hole of setup, rather than if they matched at all; since they were bound to by the simple nature of asking somebody to do something potentially dangerous.

Based on the rather in-depth information package, however, I would argue "very far."

'Is that why they count as Tasks...? Mr. Shori's original request that had shown me the Task screen existed had followed a similar setup... Is that how Tasks are generated for the System...?'

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to make sense.

The System seemed to recognize these specific requests as legitimate Tasks because they fit into this structured and easily recognizable pattern. It also explained why other requests, which hadn't featured a direct and clear reward, hadn't led to any Tasks being generated.

It was an odd realisation but one I wasn't unhappy about having.

Understanding the System was half the battle when it came to making sure I could squeeze all the advantages out of it to keep me alive, and potentially even thriving later on, in this world.

Quickly checking over the information in the package again, I came up with a basic plan of attack. I vowed to make some more detailed preparations tomorrow at Mr. Shori's place—cooking didn't require the brain power it used to, so I'd have quite a few hours to dedicate to making sure I wasn't going to miss anything important.

With a basic plan in mind for tomorrow, I closed out all the information.

A few moments later, I arrived at the door to my apartment and couldn't help but be a bit proud of my impeccable timing.

Stepping inside, I bee-lined it for the shower, wanting nothing more than to run some calming, hot water over my bruised body.

'Miss K really could've done with a bit of a gentler put-down in a lot of those instances...' I lamented as my battered self leaned heavily against the cold rock-crete wall. I wasn't actually upset, considering how much restraint she had clearly displayed, but being bruised all over still wasn't exactly what I'd consider fun.

After finishing up in the shower and heading to my room, I quickly went over the gains from the last thirty minutes of today's Dojo session.

The System notifications flashed in my mind, showcasing the progress I had made.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

A few oddities caught my attention almost immediately.

First and foremost, the amount of [Martial Arts] experience was absolutely absurd, considering that the two-and-a-half hours of intensive training with Kenzie before that had netted a total of 1,100xp.

Just thirty minutes of facing Miss K had earned almost half that?!

'I guess that's a Grandmaster for you... The System probably puts some extra bonuses on facing more difficult opponents,' I thought to myself, internally vowing to keep this in mind for next time.

'Wait a minute...! System Bonus...?'

That idea actually sparked another almost immediately.

'My bonus experience!'

I quickly pulled up the window that showed my stored-up Bonus Experience, which I hadn't actually used in quite some time, but still accumulated every time I had used the Rest Function.

[Available Bonus XP: 1,800]

I felt quite stupid realising that I had completely forgotten about it over the past few days.

After I had reached my last major milestones, I hadn't really set any new ones, so the bonus experience had simply fallen to the wayside.

'I definitely need to save a good chunk for the next session with Miss K. If I can use it in combination with the intensive 30-minute bouts against her, that would be a truly ludicrous amount of experience per hour.'

The sheer thought of gaining upwards of 1,000xp for a Skill in just thirty minutes sent tingles down my spine. That truly was the kind of experience-per-hour optimization that I lived for.

'What else do I need to focus on right now, then...?' I thought, taking a quick peek at my Skill List and Attributes.

I had always used the Bonus XP for my Body-related training, but with it being at a solid 5 by now, there really wasn't much reason to continue pumping it up for now. While a higher Body was never bad, I really needed to make sure that I didn't let other Attributes and Skills fall behind too much.

The first two things that immediately caught my attention were both [Cooking] and [Stealth].

'Maxed out Skills... That's not good at all.'

[Stealth] had been stuck at Level 3 with 3,000/3,000 experience for a few days now, while [Cooking] had similarly reached the maximum experience amount of 2,000/2,000 just earlier today.

Wasting experience drops because the governing Attributes weren't high enough to support them was an absolute cardinal sin in a gamer's eye.

'I'd absolutely be getting roasted in any forum if people saw my build... Good god, I'll need to fix this ASAP...!'

Mentally, I flicked the levers on both Edge and Tech to be the recipients of my next Bonus XP uses. They were both extremely close to ranking up already, and it wouldn't hurt to get a bit ahead on the next rank to avoid running into this issue again.

Aside from those two, all my other Skills were looking fine and without much need for immediate attention. That said, there was one Skill in particular that I wouldn't mind getting up a bit quicker, considering today's events: [Deception].

It was getting embarrassing to continuously be played with by Miss K and read like an open book. It was downright dangerous, given the whole Anima-related happenings surrounding me now, as even Miss K had admitted.

So, it was high time to actually get some more experience on the [Deception] front.

I added it to my list of automatically-applicable Bonus XP for now.

I wanted to get it to Level 3, at the very minimum, as quickly as possible, in the hopes that I'd finally be able to hide something from Miss K—although deceiving a Grandmaster might just require a way higher Skill altogether, but I was being optimistic.

Running into a Grandmaster wasn't exactly common, after all, so hopefully Level 3 would suffice for more commonly-encountered people that I'd have to hide things from.

Another thing that caught my attention in the experience rundown of the last thirty minutes of today's dojo session was the complete lack of [CQC] experience points.

While my bouts with Kenzie had offered a decent chunk, fighting Miss K with the rest of the group hadn't given me a single experience drop for it.

Considering that it was still a Level 0 Skill and Miss K's [Mentor Bonus] alone should have definitely given me at least one, it was strange not to mention any potential extra bonuses the System had so generously applied to the [Martial Arts] Skill.

'So *why didn't I get a drop...*?' I wondered, trying to figure out why the System hadn't considered any of what I had done during the last thirty minutes as [CQC] Skill worthy.

My most immediate thought was that I hadn't fought in the way I usually did. I had exclusively followed Miss K's instructions on how to attack.

With my usual style, I naturally incorporated a lot more "random" movements, attacks, and the like, while the bout with Miss K had exclusively included the moves she had tried to teach us during today's lesson.

'That... does kind of make a lot of sense. Miss K is a Grandmaster of [Martial Arts], so it would only follow that she'd understand exactly what moves would be required to exclusively train that Skill, wouldn't it...?'

That, in itself, might have also been one of the factors for the massive [Martial Arts] experience drop. If I hadn't "wasted" any movements on anything but training the Skill, then it would naturally be more efficient than what I had done versus Kenzie in terms of gaining experience.

I filed those thoughts away for now as potential explanations and things I'd have to research in the future.

For now, however, I had more netrunning to grind, as the meeting with the Operator was still racing towards me at breakneck speed and I really needed to impress.

"Time to say hello to Kill Joy again..." I muttered to myself, half-exasperated already at what the enigmatic man would likely have to say about my burnout episode the last time I had slotted the SPG-01 shard.

'No more raw-dogging cyberspace, Sera. No matter what,' I reminded myself.

Making sure to grab my cyberdeck this time around, I headed for the bed.

Laying down on it with only my underwear on—having tried to put on proper clothes but the bruises hurt with every move and ultimately deciding not to wear clothes instead—I slotted the shard into my cyberdeck and connected directly to it via the direct-access chord that I pulled out from my neck slot, before I entered the digital world once again.

'What fresh hell of a lesson does Kill Joy have in store for me today?' I wondered, bracing myself for whatever was coming next.

"Would you look at that... The girl has survived after all," Kill Joy greeted me with his ever-smug expression as the digital classroom around me materialised. "I had given you around a 30% chance of coming back. It's good to see that a single bad experience doesn't deter you, girl."

I seriously rolled my eyes at that, considering a major burnout like the one I had experienced yesterday wasn't exactly what I'd call a "single bad experience." If I had pushed just slightly harder, I would have been a goner, my brain straight up flowing out of my nostrils at that point—but apparently for Kill Joy, this was just another Tuesday.

One question had been bothering me a lot since then, so I didn't waste any time with pleasantries and went straight for the jugular. "How come I wasn't booted from the shard? Is it intended that new students can accidentally kill themselves in here? I thought you said you'd keep an eye on me and make sure to cancel the exercise if it got dangerous?"

"That is indeed true, girl. No student is allowed to come to harm using any copy of the SPG-01 shard. Harm being defined as potentially permanent damage to the body or mind," Kill Joy replied immediately, his voice oddly robotic for once, like he was reading off a piece of paper instead of his usual, more free-form speech pattern.

But based on the definition he had just given, our last excursion absolutely violated that part, no matter how you looked at it.

The only reason I hadn't suffered permanent damage to the back of my neck was the Rest Function's OP-as-hell healing factor; something that Kill Joy had no way of knowing about.

I simply glared at him, waiting for him to continue and explain why this one was an exception, but he didn't continue talking at all, even ten seconds later.

"So... Why did you not pull me out?" I asked, prompting for an answer.

I needed to understand the rules of this training shard if I didn't want to accidentally run into an issue like that again.

While I had pushed myself more than I should have, I had partially done so because I had been under the impression that Kill Joy would cancel the simulation should I run the risk of hurting myself.

He had, after all, *specifically* said that he would do so in the middle of the simulation.

A moment of silence reigned between us as I continued to glare at him, until he finally replied, "The SPG-01 shard is designed to teach and guide the students while preventing any bodily or mental harm from coming to them at any point. There is no possible scenario in which the shard's simulation would continue, should a risk be detected. As the governing AI, I can confirm that no such risks were detected during our last excursion."

I kept staring at him, trying to figure out what the actual fuck was going on.

Kill Joy had just greeted me, saying he was surprised I survived the burnout.

Both statements—the surprise that I was alive *and* the acknowledgment of the burnout—directly contradicted what he had just said.

There was also the fact that the Kill Joy featured on the shards was an AI—not a true one, mind you, as that would be heretical beyond belief.

Since the NetBurn, in which a handful of semi-sentient, rogue AIs had completely taken over the public internet and turned it into a digital death trap that had to be segmented from the rest of the digital world with an impenetrable firewall called the Silver Veil, any form of semi-sentient or higher-level AI creation had been completely outlawed by all corporations and cyberspace enthusiasts.

The VeilGuard, a supposedly “neutral” organisation that specifically existed to ensure no such threat could ever be created again, made absolutely certain that such types of AIs were never considered again by anyone.

Even someone as important and powerful as Kill Joy wouldn’t escape the wrath of the VeilGuard if he attempted to create one.

Considering that, there was absolutely no chance that the AI incorporated with the SPG-01 shard had routines allowing it to lie when specifically asked questions about its directives—it was one of the main rules laid out by the VeilGuard. Violating it would be seen as an attempt to create a new true-AI, punished swiftly by an excruciating death.

The AI could be programmed not to reply, of course, but lying? That was not possible.

“Are you saying that a burnout is not considered harmful?” I asked, trying to be more direct.

Kill Joy didn't hesitate, responding in that oddly robotic tone again, “A burnout is considered harmful in 100% of instances. They represent a severe danger to any netrunner, as they impact the nervous system and can lead to permanent brain damage or death; as such, burnouts are always considered harmful.”

My mouth hung open as I stared at him.

It took me a moment to gather myself before continuing, wanting to nail down exactly where the disconnect between our understandings occurred. “Do you acknowledge that I suffered a burnout during our last excursion within the SPG-01 shard’s Neo Avalis Cyberspace simulation, then?”

“Yes,” Kill Joy replied immediately. “The student has suffered a moderately severe case of netrunning burnout during the last excursion. The start of the session in question dates back 17 hours, 31 minutes, and 41 seconds.”

‘What the fuck is happening here...? Did the burnout break the shard’s AI or something...?’ I wondered, completely flabbergasted by the AI's answer.

Something was definitely not right, but I couldn't find an actual explanation for what might be going on.

"So you acknowledge that I suffered a burnout in this shard's simulation, yet you also claim that the shard's AI would boot me if I was at risk of being harmed? How do those two things make sense together? Please elaborate on the directives and decisions made during our last session," I asked, trying to phrase my question as precisely as possible while also asking for directive access to ensure Kill Joy couldn't lie.

Kill Joy remained quiet for a brief moment before answering, "I acknowledge that the student suffered a burnout in the shard's simulation during the last session. The shard's AI would have booted the student should they be at risk of being harmed. Both are true given the instance in which it happened. The directives were to protect the student from harm by disconnecting them. This directive was followed to the best of the AI's abilities in order to protect the student from harm."

"I... What?" I muttered, taking a step back and leaning against a nearby wall of the classroom. "That doesn't make any sense. You said you followed the directive, but I was never booted from the shard's simulation. I disconnected myself. Elaborate, Kill Joy."

"The shard's AI followed the directive to the best of its abilities in order to protect the student from harm," Kill Joy robotically repeated. "The student was booted from the simulation in accordance with directive 14.7b, following the procedures as outlined in manual addendum 6a. The student subsequently continued the simulation until they disconnected themselves."

Once again, I could do nothing but stare at Kill Joy's image in front of me.

According to the AI, it had tried to boot me, but it had somehow failed to do so?

That shouldn't be possible.

The *entire* shard was governed by the AI itself.

It had ultimate access to everything; actually, not just access, but it literally *ran* everything.

Without the AI, there was no simulation; it literally *could not* possibly fail, unless the procedures were designed to fail. But if that were the case, then the shard would never have been able to be sold on the market.

The governing AI *needed* to be able to disconnect students for a variety of reasons; it wasn't as iron-clad a rule as the one enforced by the VeilGuard, but in an open market, you wouldn't get particularly far with a shard that was too dangerous to use.

There was really only one way to test it, though.

"Kill Joy, boot me from the shard in accordance with the procedures outlined in manual addendum 6a," I ordered, hoping that the AI's directives included following orders from students if they were phrased correctly.

Before I could even worry about whether or not it would comply, the world around me disintegrated, and I found myself lying back in my bed—I had already been booted.

“What the fuck...?”

I sat up, trying to process what had just happened.

The AI clearly had the capability to boot me, and it did so instantly upon my request. So why hadn't it done the same during my burnout? The discrepancy was driving me nuts. There was a gap here that I couldn't quite bridge, and it was making my head spin.

As I mulled it over, I realised I simply needed more information.

Perhaps Kill Joy had some internal logs or diagnostics that could shed light on the issue. But accessing those might be tricky, and I'd have to phrase my questions carefully.

“Kill Joy,” I said aloud, half-expecting a reply despite being out of the shard. Shaking my head at my own jumbled thoughts, I took a second to re-focus on what I wanted to do; being flabbergasted and out of it was not conducive to an investigation like this.

After a few moments, I took a last deep breath and reconnected to the shard.

The classroom reformed around me, and Kill Joy's smirking face appeared. “Back so soon? Didn't expect you to be this eager for another round.”

“Yeah, yeah, don't get too excited. I need you to run diagnostics on the last session and provide a detailed log of the boot attempt and any anomalies related to it,” I demanded, trying to sound as authoritative as possible.

Kill Joy's smirk faded, replaced by a more serious demeanour. “Running diagnostics. This will take a moment.”

As I waited, I couldn't help but feel a mix of frustration and curiosity.

There was something *seriously* off about this whole situation, and I was determined to get to the bottom of it. The AI had acknowledged the burnout, claimed to have followed its directives perfectly, yet I hadn't been booted.

But the procedures to boot a student clearly worked, I had just confirmed that.

It just didn't add up.

A few minutes later, Kill Joy spoke up again. “Diagnostics complete. Anomalies detected: One. During the last session, a directive to boot the student was executed but failed due to insufficient permissions caused by an external override. The source of the override could not be identified.”

My eyes widened at that.

An external override?! Someone or something had intervened during my session?!

But how?!

The shard was a *closed* system, literally only connecting to my cerebral link. There shouldn't be any external influences possible, like at all.

"Can you provide more details on this override? What kind of external source are we talking about?" I asked, my heart rapidly beating in my ears.

"The override was initiated through an unidentified signal that bypassed all of the shard's internal security protocols. The signal source and method of bypass remain unknown," Kill Joy replied.

A cold shudder ran down my spine at the thought that somebody or something out there had managed to slip right into a shard created by Kill Joy himself—just who could possibly do that?!

And then it struck me.

'It's the System...! It's gotta be,' I thought to myself.

It had generated a loot-shard inside the simulation, so naturally, it followed that it needed admin-level access to some degree. Since it was some unknown, almost definitely reality-defying thing, it also made sense that it could breach into something as sophisticated as a training shard designed and coded by Kill Joy himself.

I couldn't think of any other person or entity that could possibly beat the man's security protocols; at least none that would ever be interested in a random girl trying to do her first Cyberspace excursion.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense to me and my heart slowly calmed itself down from the rapid beating that it had engaged in at the realisation that something had managed to hack itself into my training shard's closed system.

I took another few minutes mulling it over, but I couldn't find any holes in my argument.

'Fucking System once again giving me a goddamn heart attack... I swear this thing's about as much trouble as it's a help,' I lamented, before slowly making my way towards the seat inside the classroom.

Sitting down, I looked up at Kill Joy and decided to finally start today's netrunning session.

I had experience to grind...