

## **Chapter 147 - Recovery**

[System]: *Rest completed. Time rested: 08:00:00*

[System]: *600 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

My eyes fluttered open, the familiar post-Rest Function disorientation hitting me hard, as always.

*‘Good to see some things never change, I guess...’*

I blinked a few times, forcing my vision to settle, and glanced around the unfamiliar room.

The memories from yesterday—or what barely qualified as “yesterday,” given how the Rest Function made sleep instant—flooded back in an unrelenting wave.

Hard to forget something like that, even if I’d wanted to.

So much had happened it felt impossible to process.

*‘I hope Gabriel’s okay... and Oliver too.’*

Their injuries flashed through my mind.

Oddly, I worried less about Oliver, even though he’d been *fatally* wounded, compared to Gabriel’s “tamer” amputations.

But Oliver had PremMed on his side, and that changed everything.

Even with the doc’s grim estimated recovery stat, my gut refused to believe Oliver wouldn’t make it. Probably because of my time watching Neon Dragons playthroughs—PremMed had been bullshit there too, an unkillable safety net for NPCs.

They just... didn’t die.

It didn’t feel like it would be any different here.

Still, the question of how Oliver even *had* PremMed gnawed at me.

He had looked just as blindsided as the rest of us when Nyxstalker spilled it. If I had to guess... maybe his company fronted the cost. A temporary coverage thing, since he’d been heading the liaison duties with the OriginTech mess?

That tracked, but it was just a theory.

I let my mind wander like that for a while, twisting over small details because the big ones felt too heavy to deal with yet.

I knew I had work ahead of me.

Awkward talks. Dangerous ones, especially with Valeria.

But for now, a few minutes to just... breathe.

Gabriel, though—he was the one who'd take the brunt of this. No doubt about it.

He'd already been shaken to the core after the stabbing on the way home.  
Understandably so, of course.

But this? Getting dismembered on the damn living room floor?  
You didn't easily bounce back from that. Not really.

A sigh slipped out before I realized it, heavy and rough.

"Gabe..."

Putting the thoughts about Gabriel aside for now, as there was really nothing I could do for him at this moment in time, I focused on the first big task that I'd have to take care of: The System.

There was a veritable deluge of System Notifications that had been stored up over the course of the dinner and the subsequent mayhem that needed dealing with—better earlier rather than later, considering the kind of conversations that would no doubt follow once I left the bed.

Taking an anticipatory breath, I opened the System within my mind and allowed the notifications to filter in.

[System]: NOTICE: Experience gains have been condensed for ease of readability. This setting can be changed by the User in the "Preferences" menu.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

[System]: [Negotiation] Skill has reached Level 4. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download available.

[System]: 2,100xp gained for [Deception] Skill.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 1,000xp gained for [Meditation] Skill.

[System]: 800xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.

[System]: Corporate-Agent Mid-Tier (Netrunner) defeated [Incapacitated].

[System]: 400xp gained for defeating [Incapacitated] Corporate-Agent Mid-Tier (Netrunner).

[System]: You have reached Level 2. You have earned 1x [General Attribute Point].

[System]: Note - 1x [General Attribute Point] will automatically be applied in 47:05:47.

[System]: 700xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.

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

[System]: 300xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

[System]: 900xp gained for [*Anima Razor*] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [*Throwing*] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [*Murder*] Skill.

[System]: [*Murder*] Skill has *reached* Level 2. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download *available*.

[System]: 600xp gained for [*CQC*] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [*Martial Arts*] Skill.

[System]: Corporate-Agent (Low-Tier) defeated. [*x3*]

[System]: 2,250xp (+750xp) gained for defeating Scavenger (Low-Tier) [*x3*]. [*First-Kill Bonus Experience (x1)*]

[System]: You have *reached* Level 3. You have *earned* 1x [*General Perk Point*].

[System]: *Note* - 1x [*General Perk Point*] will automatically be applied in 47:05:47.

[System]: 1,400xp gained for [*First-Aid*] Skill.

[System]: [*First-Aid*] Skill has *reached* Level 2. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download *available*.

[System]: 300xp gained for [*Jury-Rigging*] Skill.

[System]: 600xp gained for *Body*.

[System]: 800xp gained for *Reflex*.

[System]: 400xp gained for *Intellect*.

[System]: 600xp gained for *Intuition*.

[System]: 1,800xp gained for *Edge*.

[System]: 200xp gained for *Tech*.

[System]: 1,200xp gained for *Ego*.

[System]: 1,100xp gained for *Anima*.

The breath I'd been holding caught hard in my throat as the torrent of experience slammed into me.

*'Holy fuck...'*

It was insane. Absolutely overwhelming. But in a twisted way, it made sense.

This had been my closest call yet—closer even than the Valir incident—and this time it hadn't just been me at risk. No wonder the System decided to shower me with points.

What I *hadn't* expected, however, was the sheer scale of it.

*'Two Character Levels at once...?'* That was... odd.

Every other Skill or Attribute hit a wall once it capped out, forcing me to consciously upgrade before progress could continue.

But Character Level? No cap there.

It just jumped up, automatically. No wasted experience at all.

Which, yeah, kind of made sense, as it didn't actually grant any kind of download or major muscle memory or anything like that—but it was still something I hadn't exactly been aware of until now.

But with the Character Levels came the lead weight in my gut: Decisions.

A [General Attribute Point] and a [General Perk Point].

On paper, I loved this stuff—choice was the best part of RPGs, after all.

But in practice? When it wasn't just a game build but my *actual life* on the line? No guides, no second opinions, no “reset if I fuck up”? The pressure was suffocating.

Skill Perks had already been rough choices, narrowing down one ability out of maybe four or five at most. Now I had to pick just *one* from *all* of them?

A heavy sigh clawed its way out of me, my throat finally loosening. “Haaa... This'll be a bit of a pain...”

Still, it wasn't something I needed to solve right this second. I could let it sit for a day or two.

What I *couldn't* put off were the Skill level-ups, not with downloads on the line.

[Negotiation] was top priority—no doubt Valeria had some choice words waiting for me after my actions last night, and every scrap of expertise and leverage mattered.

[Murder], though... that one sat lower on the list. But it was also only Level 2 now, so the download wouldn't burn me out too badly.

And I couldn't deny the truth anymore: I owed a lot to that Skill.

*‘Without [Murder], I wouldn't have pulled half of that off yesterday. It steadied me when my Ego was burnt out... Put the knife exactly where it needed to go.’*

I forced myself to repeat the thought, to make it sink in.

I needed to own it.

Aversion to killing was one thing, but in a life-or-death fight? *Somebody* had to die.

*‘And I'd much rather it wasn't me or mine.’*

That didn't mean I was okay. Not even close.

The cold grip of regret lingered, twisted by the worse truth—that part of me didn't even feel guilty about it. The self-loathing from that realization gnawed at me, digging into my chest, impossible to shake no matter how much I told myself it had been necessary.

*‘That's not going away anytime soon...’*

I gave my head a light shake, like that would somehow rattle my thoughts back into order.

It didn't. The haze stayed right where it was.

So I pulled up the System Interface instead, scrolling straight to the Skills tab until [Murder] lit up in front of me.

My mental cursor hovered over the download prompt, the weight of it sinking in.

*'Better to just rip the bandage off...'*

I drew in a long, steady breath, then hit confirm.

It started like the last time around—slow, creeping, almost gentle.

A weight pressing at the edges of my mind, seeping in like fog under a door.

Then it dropped, heavy and undeniable, folding into my thoughts as though it had always belonged there.

My fingers twitched, curling and uncurling against the sheets, every knuckle flexing as if testing out new wiring. My shoulders rolled without me telling them to, shifting into a posture that felt alien and yet terrifyingly natural.

A readiness I hadn't had a second ago.

The knowledge unfurled in jagged fragments.

*"Ribcage strikes—angled between ribs, slide the knife along the bone to puncture the lung without dulling the blade."*

*"Grip adjustments—reverse grip for tight spaces, hammer grip for power, pinch grip for speed. Carotid slash, shallow and horizontal—drop them in five seconds, drown them in their own blood."*

*"Patella tendon slice—mobility gone instantly, target crippled before the killing blow as they race towards your blade from the fall. Subclavian artery, just under the collarbone—massive bleed, shock sets in almost immediately."*

*"Knife rake across tendons in the wrist or elbow—disarm and disable in one move, follow-up for the kill. Backhand thrust to the liver—slightly slower death, but keeps them in too much pain to fight back."*

*"Face cuts—eyes, lips, cheeks—psychological terror to make them panic before the end. Grab the mouth, tilt the head back, drive the point straight into the roof of the mouth—brain puncture, instant silence."*

I could *feel* it—my hands gripping invisible throats, knives I didn't hold sinking into flesh, blood that didn't exist splashing over my hands, arms and face, angles playing out in a precise, perfect rhythm.

There was no hesitation in the movements running through me, no wasted energy. Every strike was designed to end the fight before the other person even realized it had begun.

The shudder hit me again, crawling from the base of my spine up to my neck.

These weren't mere possibilities—they were instructions. Blueprints laid bare with not just knowledge but the exact muscle memory to repeat them in real life, at any point.

I *knew how* to do these things now.

My muscles itched to try, to follow through on the phantom motions already digging grooves into my memory.

And beneath all of that—beneath the cold, clinical facts sliding into place like puzzle pieces—something darker stirred once more. Something I had no interest in satiating, yet ended up having to in recent times, again and again.

That deep, disgusting part of me that had waited all this time.

It drank in every detail with a kind of quiet delight, the way a starving animal savors its first bite of meat.

It whispered with wordless satisfaction as the next set of methods carved into my brain:

*“Twist the blade when pulling free—rotate forty-five degrees to tear wider, force bleeding that no medic can seal quickly.”*

*“Hook the mouth, tear backward, disorient and silence. Pain overrides fight every time. When the head is turned, jam the knife beneath the jaw, angle upward—sever the brainstem.”*

*“Instantaneous death.”*

I swallowed hard, bile rising in my throat even as my pulse stayed steady, eerily calm.

My conscious self recoiled, disgusted at the sheer brutality of it, but the buried part of me *reveled* in it, humming with grim approval.

I hated it.

And yet... I knew I was better off with the knowledge and muscle memory as part of me.

Knowing how to kill wasn't just morbid detail or a potential contingency anymore—it was much-needed survival. These weren't skills for someone else, in some game world.

They were mine now, etched deep into my body, waiting for *when* they would be needed—not *if*.

My fingers dug into the sheets, knuckles further whitening.

The download finished. The knowledge settled deep.

And just like the first time, there was no taking it back now.

My chest heaved, breath ragged, the sheets clenched tight between my fingers.

The download had finished, but the aftershocks still rattled through me—each technique, each pseudo kill, replaying in vivid clarity as if I'd already carried them out a hundred times.

My stomach twisted. My throat burned. I felt the sting of tears I refused to let fall.

Not for the agents I'd carved through yesterday, nor for the spectres that I killed as part of the download—no, that wasn't it.

I didn't feel anything for them.

The disgust clawing at me came from somewhere else, older and far, far *deeper*.

From the memory that never faded, the one that pressed in closer whenever I was forced to do it again. My hands shook as I stared at them, feeling the phantom slickness of blood I couldn't wash off, no matter how much I told myself it had been necessary.

"Breathe... just breathe," I whispered to myself, my voice trembling. "It's just... it's just data. Just the System. It doesn't mean anything..."

But it *did* mean something.

Every shift in my posture, every automatic flex of my grip, every subtle adjustment my body made without my permission screamed that it was already *me*.

And the worst part was knowing that if I was pushed again, I would use every single one of these techniques... And *enjoy* it.

I pressed my palms over my face, dragging them down slowly, forcing air into my lungs until the tremors in my chest dulled to something manageable.

I had to hold on.

"Not now," I muttered under my breath, voice rough. "Not now. *Later*. You deal with it later."

Clinging to that thin thread of resolve, I blinked the tears away and pulled the Interface back up. If I didn't want [Murder] to be the freshest thing echoing in my skull, then I needed to bury it under something else.

Something cleaner. Something I could stomach more easily.

My eyes landed on [Negotiation], Level 4 glowing, waiting.

I forced in another steadying breath, jaw tight.

"Alright," I said quietly, more to myself than to the System. "Let's do this one. At least this one won't make me feel like a fucking monster..."

I hovered over the download prompt, and confirmed it right away.

The moment I confirmed, the world tilted. Not violently, not with the sharp stab of [Murder], but with the subtle weight of a library being dropped neatly into my skull.

Where Level 3 had cracked open the doors to subtlety—framing, detachment, cultural nuance—Level 4 threw me headfirst into mastery-by-internalization.

It wasn't about memorizing tactics or strategies like before, but rather about weaving them together until they became instinct.

It started with body language.

Before, I'd learned how to nod, how to pace eye contact, how to draw someone out.

Now, the System rewired those motions into seamless choreography.

My posture shifted, not just to appear calm, but to *broadcast* authority or empathy depending on the tilt of my shoulders. My breath adjusted without conscious thought, slowing to anchor the rhythm of a tense exchange—or quickening just enough to build urgency in the other person without them realizing *why* they felt that way.

Even silence itself became a weapon; I suddenly knew how long to let it hang before the other party broke first and when abruptly breaking it could create momentary openings in the other person.

Framing returned as well, sharper now.

No longer just setting the stage for conversation—I learned to *layer* frames, stacking contexts like a house of cards.

Start with common ground, then subtly slide the frame toward my goal, leaving the other person to feel like they'd walked themselves there.

It wasn't persuasion anymore.

It had turned into social architecture by now; manipulation in its purest form.

Detachment deepened, too.

Before, it was about not reacting emotionally.

Now, it was about controlled vulnerability—choosing *when* to show a flash of anger, or when to crack with deliberate exhaustion, all of it calculated. My Ego and Edge synced perfectly with this, letting me slide into the emotional register I needed, then drop it the instant it lost value.

The flood of knowledge hit me harder as my newly acquired Perk folded in as well.

[Cultural Savant] didn't just highlight surface-level gestures anymore—it broke down *layers*.



Subtext. Implicit hierarchy.

A bow held half a second too long in a boardroom.

The wrong kind of humor dropped in the middle of a negotiation.

The little betrayals in tone that marked someone from Neo-Avalis versus Fera Barkhin.

It wasn't simply language but *context*.

With the System pouring it into me, I felt like I could walk into almost any room, pick up the air currents, and know how to swim *with* them instead of against them.

But the newest revelation—what truly seemed to mark Level 4—was a strategy I'd never consciously considered before: *false retreat*.

The download painted it into my mind in detail.

By deliberately conceding at a critical moment, letting the other person think they'd "won" the entire negotiation, I could bait them into overextending—handing me more than I'd ever have gotten through direct resistance.

It wasn't just manipulation; it was timing, knowing exactly *when* and *how* to fall back so the forward push later would devastate.

The System tied this into muscle memory too—tone shifts, posture slackening, the exact phrasing that sounded like surrender but planted the seeds for reversal.

I breathed hard as it all clicked in, my pulse slowing as the torrent settled into place.

My hands flexed unconsciously, like they'd just shaken a hundred different hands in a hundred different ways. My throat felt like it had practiced dozens of tones I hadn't spoken yet. My facial muscles burnt from holding thousands of different expressions in tens of thousands of different situations.

The knowledge settled heavy in my head, crowding up against [Murder] like oil and water.

Survival, on both sides of the coin: Social and Physical.

I lingered on the mattress a little longer, letting my nerves settle.

But the longer I waited, the heavier the weight in my chest got, so I forced myself to move.

*'Better to get it over with now than let the dread fester...'*

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I rose slowly, every muscle stiff but functional.

My hand went to the back of my neck almost on instinct, fingertips brushing over the patch of spray-bandage Valeria had applied. No raw sting, no shooting pain—just the faint texture of the film clinging to skin that, only hours ago, had been scorched and ruined.

A relief, yes, but also a problem.

I frowned, pressing harder. Nothing. No pain at all.

*'Too clean, too fast...'*

It wasn't like that nightmare with Kill Joy, where the wound around my neural link had required several Rest Function uses in a row to heal over.

*'If she sees this... what the hell do I even tell her?'*

A few hours to go from wrecked, burnt meat to a nearly pristine neck wasn't exactly what I'd call "normal recovery". If Valeria noticed—and of course she would notice, of that, I had no doubt—I didn't have a neat little excuse waiting.

I turned the possibilities over in my head.

Maybe she'd chalk it up to Anima—she undoubtedly knew by now that I had some kind of connection to it, after all.

If I leaned into that, it might be enough... Or maybe she'd decide not to push, at least not now. It was impossible to tell, and I hated the uncertainty of it all.

Either way, it didn't matter.

She'd ask what she wanted to ask, and I'd just have to figure it out in the moment.

Like everything else.

I let out a steady breath, ran both hands down my face, then crossed the small space to the door. My hand hovered over the handle for a second longer than I wanted, like even that tiny moment of delay might buy me something.

It didn't.

"Alright," I muttered under my breath.

I twisted the handle, pulled the door open, and stepped out into the living room to go and meet Valeria and have a talk...