

Chapter 86 - Pistols & Firearms

With the three pistols laid out in front of me, I got to work figuring out what I had *actually* ended up picking up here. This was the moment I'd been waiting for—the perfect opportunity to let [Appraisal] show off what it could really do.

I hovered my hand over the first pistol, not because I needed to but because it just felt right, and activated the ability.

'Appraisal.'

Immediately, the System's interface sprang to life, displaying a detailed rundown of the weapon I was examining.

[== Oranella - Basic Information ==]
[Rarity: Common]
[Tier: 1]
[Price: 360-480{c}]
[Barrel Length: 112mm]
[Empty Weight: 905g]
[Manufacturer: Walpurgis Industries]
[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel, Plastics]

[== Oranella - Combat Information ==]
[Durability: 440/470]
[Firing Modes: Semi-Automatic, Burst]
[Rate of Fire: 400 Semi, 650 Burst]
[Calibre: 10mm]
[Magazine Size: 16]
[Effective Range: 10-200m]

The Oranella was an odd-looking pistol, which was exactly why I'd picked it up in the first place. It had a bit of a Glock vibe, but beefier—probably to handle that 10mm calibre instead of the 9mm I was more familiar with from my old life.

It wasn't *just* the heft, though. The gun was positively *covered* in all these ornamental flourishes, tiny engraved images of random symbols and emblems that probably meant something to people who shopped at Walpurgis Industries.

Walpurgis Industries had been around in the game too, having always been known for their eccentric designs, and while I'd never really been a fan of their stuff—too flashy for my taste—I had to admit, seeing it up close like this, it had a certain... *style*.

Tacky, for sure, but appealing in its own way.

With the Oranella appraised and mentally filed away, I moved on to the next choice, the pistol sitting in the centre of my lineup.

The second pistol I had picked up was, without a doubt, the crown jewel in terms of aesthetics. Sleek, chrome, and black, it was a piece of art, with intricately coiled snakes embossed all over the gun.

This was definitely more of a showpiece than something you'd carry around every day, but *damn*, if it wasn't a showpiece.

Focusing on it, I called up my Ability again.

'Appraisal.'

[== Kale SE-57 - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: Common]

[Tier: 1]

[Price: 510-540{c}]

[Barrel Length: 123mm]

[Empty Weight: 733g]

[Manufacturer: Ethera Inc.]

[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel]

[== Kale SE-7 - Combat Information ==]

[Durability: 514/530]

[Firing Modes: Semi-Automatic]

[Rate of Fire: 350 Semi]

[Calibre: 5.7x28mm]

[Magazine Size: 23]

[Effective Range: 10-300m]

As soon as I saw the specs, it clicked—this beauty was clearly inspired by the FN Five-Seven from my old life. The devs had given it a stunning makeover, but kept most of its core mechanics intact. That particular gun had been my go-to in a ton of games, so I was definitely tempted to try this one out right away.

But there was still one more option left to check out before I made my decision.

Turning my attention to the final pistol in the lineup, I activated [Appraisal] one last time.

'Appraisal.'

[== N74 Siral - Basic Information ==]

[Rarity: Common]

[Tier: 1]

[Price: 470-530{c}]

[Barrel Length: 114mm]

[Empty Weight: 713g]

[Manufacturer: Siral Weapons & Ammunitions]

[Materials: Durasteel, Plasteel, Plastics]

[== N74 Siral - Combat Information ==]
[Durability: 345/410]
[Firing Modes: Semi-Automatic, Automatic]
[Rate of Fire: 400 Semi, 1200 Auto]
[Calibre: 9mm Siral]
[Magazine Size: 32]
[Effective Range: 10-200m]

The N74 was a classic example of Siral's over-engineering at its finest—a company known for crafting unique solutions to problems nobody else really cared about.

This pistol was a prime example of that whole approach.

It was part of Siral's proprietary weapon and ammunition set, which was one of the main reasons most players in the game avoided their products like the plague. Random gangers on the street didn't usually carry Siral-proprietary ammo, so restocking in the middle of a mission was always a nightmare.

Siral had this reputation for taking something that worked perfectly fine and then tweaking it to the point of absurdity.

The N74 was no exception.

It was like they took what could've been a solid, reliable pistol—something akin to a G18 from my old life—and decided to "improve" it by slapping on a bunch of proprietary parts that, while boosting the gun's performance slightly, also made it nearly impossible to maintain without specialised tools and knowledge.

And the ammo? Yeah, they'd done a number on that too.

Sure, it packed a bit more punch and had better penetration, but good luck finding it.

Standard 9mm cartridges were a dime a dozen, one of the most used calibres in the game, but Siral's custom rounds were about as rare as a sane ganger at midnight.

Who in their right mind even needed a self-defence pistol with a rate of fire of 1200 rounds per minute was beyond me, but apparently, it had been popular enough to still be kicking around several years into the future, when the main story of the game began.

I'd seen it on the shelves in gun stores during various playthroughs I'd watched.

And as much as I appreciated the performance boost, the idea of being stuck without ammo or a way to fix the thing if it jammed was a major turn-off for me. But regardless, it was a pretty fascinating piece of tech—just not something I'd want to bet my life on in a pinch.

For a round of shooting training inside a gun range, though? Now we were talking.

Deciding to go with what I knew from my past life's gaming experience, I opted to start with the Kale SE-57.

Sure, a 9mm would've been the textbook choice for a beginner, but there was no way I was going to jump straight into handling an automatic pistol without at least a little practice first.

The 10mm Oranella, with its chunkier ammunition, would likely have some serious kick, so I figured I'd save that beast for later. The Kale, with its sleek design and more manageable recoil, seemed like the perfect starting point.

I picked up the gun, feeling its weight settle comfortably in my hand, and inserted the pre-loaded magazine. Trying to remember everything I had learned from countless hours of watching random tutorials and playthroughs, I assumed what I hoped was a decent shooting stance.

Connecting my cerebral interface to the wireless shooting range system, I initiated the basic drills.

Jade was already in full swing in the lane next to me, her gunfire a rhythmic beat in the background. No pressure, right? I focused on the target in front of me, doing my best to breathe evenly and keep my excitement in check.

Shooting guns was always pretty fun, after all.

But when I finally lined up the shot and squeezed the trigger, nothing happened.

The trigger was locked, refusing to budge.

Confused, I glanced down at the pistol, mentally running through possible reasons for the malfunction. That's when I realised—I hadn't disengaged the safety. With a small flick of my index finger, I corrected my mistake and got ready to try again.

This time, I was prepared for the loud bang and it actually followed as the pistol finally fired.

The bullet zipped through the air, hitting the target with a solid thud.

Except... it landed way lower than I intended, right in the lower portion of what would be someone's groin. I cringed at the thought, quickly trying to adjust my aim. But the next two shots didn't fare much better, both landing in the same unfortunate area.

Jade's shooting suddenly stopped, and a moment later, her head popped around the divider between our lanes. She looked at me, her expression a mix of horror and amusement.

"Listen, Ela. I get that the guys outside were disgusting but... Is that *really* necessary?"

Before I could respond, she held up her hands in a placating gesture. "Hey, no judgement here. I'm not about to tell you how to do your job. Just saying, it's a *bit* extreme. But you do you."

And just like that, she disappeared back behind the divider, leaving me alone with my shame and a gun that clearly had a mind of its own.

'It's not my fault I don't know how to shoot a gun, dammit!' I fumed silently, glaring at the piece of metal in my hands. 'I swear, I'm not doing it on purpose...'

Determined to get it right, I shifted my stance again, this time focusing more on my grip and the angle of the gun. I wasn't about to let a few embarrassing shots ruin my first real chance to get some hands-on experience.

Time to redeem myself and maybe, *just maybe*, hit the target where I actually tried to aim...

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Around twenty minutes later, my hands were a bit numb from the constant recoiling of the pistol in my hands, but I had managed to land quite a number of shots where I actually intended them to go—despite the accidental groin shots that still seemed to happen occasionally, regardless of my intentions.

Taking a quick break, I checked the stored up System Notifications.

[System]: *[Pistols] Skill has been unlocked.*

[System]: *500xp gained for [Pistols] Skill.*

[System]: *[Firearms] Skill has been unlocked.*

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

[System]: *200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*

'Huh...? That's a lot of experience for just twenty minutes of work,' I thought, surprised at the 500 experience points I'd racked up.

That was nearly an entire level's worth, which usually took me at least an hour or two with most Skills—sometimes even longer.

So what was different about [Pistols] that it rewarded so much experience in such a short time?

There were a few possibilities, one being that the System might be emulating some of the original game's design choices.

In Neon Dragons, combat was the main focus, the core loop of the game. It made sense that combat-related Skills would level up faster to keep players engaged.

After all, if you're spending most of your time fighting, you'd want those Skills to improve steadily to keep the gameplay satisfying.

Another possibility, one that seemed *even more* plausible to me, however, was that the System factored in resource investment.

Pistols used non-recoverable ammunition, meaning every shot came at a cost.

Even though I wasn't paying for bullets right now in this weird back-alley shooting range with Jade, the System might still be calculating experience as if I were. If that were the case, it would explain why the experience gains were so generous.

This idea felt more viable because I'd noticed a similar pattern with other Skills that involved non-recoverable resources.

Skills like [Cooking], [Medicine], and [First-Aid] had all given me decent chunks of experience, even when the tasks themselves were relatively quick. Dressing a wound, for instance, only took five to ten minutes, yet the experience drop was often comparable to working out for half an hour or more.

So it made sense that [Pistols], a Skill that chewed through resources comparatively quickly, would give a similarly boosted experience rate.

If each shot counted as a significant investment, then the experience gains I was seeing weren't just generous—they were practically guaranteed.

That conclusion sparked another thought within my mind.

'So, the more resources invested into a Skill, the more experience it gives, huh?'

A grin spread across my face as I turned toward the N74 Siral, loading it up with a sense of anticipation.

'If a couple dozen shots give me 500 XP, what kind of gains could I see from a few hundred or even a thousand rounds then...?'

Before I went full-auto on the next set of targets, I quickly made sure to add both [Pistols] and [Firearms] to my automatic Bonus Experience allocation—a step I'd completely forgotten about until now.

I wasn't going to get a chance like this often, so I had to milk every last drop out of it.

With a mental flick, I activated the targets in my lane again, levelled the N74, and squeezed the trigger, bracing myself for what I expected to be a punishing recoil from the automatic pistol.

The rapid-fire brrrt echoed through the empty shooting range as the pistol emptied its entire magazine in just over a second.

But much to my surprise, controlling the recoil wasn't nearly as tough as I'd anticipated. Sure, the shots sprayed everywhere—seriously, why did they keep hitting the target's groin?!—but the pistol itself didn't kick as violently as I'd feared.

'Huh... I guess the designers really nailed the balance on this one. I wasn't expecting it to be this easy to control,' I mused, examining the sleek weapon in my hands.

Weapon manufacturing had been a cornerstone of this world for centuries, so it made sense that they'd perfected making guns that were more efficient than hazardous.

Still, it was surprising how little kickback I felt, considering the sheer volume of firepower I'd just unleashed. Physics dictated that all that force had to go somewhere, but all I felt was a bit of numbness in my hand.

Then again, thinking back to all those gunTubers I used to watch in my old life, recoil control wasn't always as dramatic as video games liked to make it out to be. The real challenge was keeping your shots on target, maintaining a tight firing group, rather than fighting to keep the weapon from bouncing around like some ridiculous Hollywood portrayal.

I glanced at the target again—yeah, the grouping could use some work, but that was a problem for future-Sera. Right now, I had the perfect opportunity to get a solid grasp on this Skill and rack up some serious experience.

Taking a deep breath, I lined up the next set of targets, ready to see just how much more I could push my progress with this little powerhouse in my hands...

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Another ten minutes later, I had to take a break—I could barely feel my fingers anymore.

I'd fired off more than 500 rounds of 9mm Siral, slamming in one magazine after another, just unloading on the targets downrange until they were more holes than paper.

The constant barrage had turned my hands numb, the weight of the gun now feeling like an extension of my arm rather than something I was simply holding. I'd been ignoring the various System Notifications up until now, but with my fingers throbbing and my hands tingling, I figured it was time to see how my grind had paid off.

I pulled up the messages, and my eyes widened as I read through them:

[System]: 400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for *[Pistols]* Skill.

[System]: *[Pistols]* Skill has reached Level 1. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for *[Firearms]* Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

'What the fuck...?'

"Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available"? Since when did the System ask for permission? It usually just jammed that stuff into my brain whether I was ready or not.

I couldn't help but feel a mix of confusion and annoyance at that.

I mean, I'd literally lost an eye to Kenzie because of a poorly timed download, and now the System decides to play nice? Why now, after all this time?

The System had proven to be adaptive before, like with the way it handled Skill overflow differently after the first time I maxed out my slots. Maybe it had learned from the past screw-up with Kenzie and was now trying to avoid causing another problem.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling of being slightly miffed—like, where was this consideration when I needed it before? Would it have really been so terrible to simply ask for my go-ahead from the get-go?

Regardless of the why, however, the real question now was how to actually access this new download.

I tried to focus on triggering it manually, and as soon as the thought had crossed my mind, the System sprang to life.

Without any further input from me, it began jamming the Muscle Memory and Knowledge into my brain. It wasn't painful, but it was intense, as per usual—like a sudden rush of understanding and coordination that wasn't there before.

I could practically feel the newfound muscle memory settling into my body, the familiar sensation of a firearm in my hand now accompanied by the instinctual knowledge of how to use it properly.

The entire experience was a lot faster and smoother than I'd anticipated, but the sheer intensity of the download left me a bit light-headed.

While there wasn't much in terms of Knowledge, the actual amount of Muscle Memory seemed to be disproportionately high, making my entire body tingle as my muscles instinctively responded to the System's influence.

As the sensations faded, I opened my eyes and flexed my fingers experimentally, feeling the difference already. The gun felt more natural in my grip, like it was *meant* to be there, rather than the awkward posture and grip I've had before.

I slammed in a fresh magazine, even though I'd noticed that there wasn't much of an experience boost jumping from the Kale to the Siral.

Still, I wanted a direct comparison between before and after levelling up, and since the Siral was what I'd been using most recently, it made sense to stick with it for now.

As I fired off another round downrange, the difference was immediate and *massive*.

The shots were landing mostly on target, with only a few strays here and there, instead of the wild spray I'd been dealing with before.

'Man, that's gotta be at least a 300-400% increase in accuracy... That's kind of insane,' I thought, glancing down at the pistols in front of me again.

If all the levels compounded like this, I'd be controlling this thing like a pro in just a few more levels. The idea was both exhilarating and a little terrifying. If this was just the beginning, what would it be like when I hit even higher levels...?

Before I could get too lost in my thoughts, Jade's face popped up from behind the divider.

"How long are we going to keep this up? Not that I'm complaining—I don't usually get this kind of chance—but still..." Her tone was neutral, not giving away whether she thought we should stay or go. It was clear she was leaving the decision up to me.

She had a point, though.

We'd ducked into the store to avoid the Golden Phoenix enforcers, spinning a story about taking shooting lessons to get them off our backs.

But now that we were *actually* shooting, I wasn't entirely sure how to proceed.

My first thought was to head out through the back door, but without knowing what was happening outside or whether the enforcers were still hanging around, it felt risky.

We could easily walk right into them and end up in the same mess we were trying to avoid—except this time, we wouldn't have the element of surprise or a convenient story to fall back on.

On the other hand, this was an incredibly rare opportunity to gain experience in Skills I wouldn't normally have access to.

I wasn't sure when I'd get another chance like this, especially on Mr. Stirling's reputational-dime. Plus, convincing Valeria to let me take shooting lessons might be a tough sell, considering she'd already had to pull some serious strings to get me into the dojo, if Kenzie's and Miss K's words were anything to go by.

I carefully weighed my options, quickly thinking through the potential risks and rewards.

It was a delicate balance, no matter how I cut it—pushing our luck too far could land us in serious trouble, but playing it too safe might mean missing out on something that could give me a real edge down the line as well.

"Let's give it a little more time," I ultimately decided, keeping my voice steady. "We don't want to rush out and risk running into those guys again. They might be keeping an eye on the backdoor, after all. Besides, might as well make the most of this while we're here, right? I'd rather leave with some new insights under my belt than empty-handed, if we already have to wait anyway."

"Sure thing, you're the boss," Jade replied with a nonchalant shrug, then slipped back behind the divider, leaving me alone with the three pistols I'd chosen.

With nothing else to focus on, I decided it was time to back up my words with some action and dove straight into some serious [Pistols] and [Firearms] training.

Swapping out the Siral for the Oranella—the heaviest of the three pistols—I braced myself and got to work.

The 10mm had a bit more kick than the others, but the added weight from its hefty frame made it surprisingly manageable.

Thanks to my newly acquired first level in [Pistols], I was able to handle it pretty well, all things considered. I only accidentally hit the groin area one out of every ten shots, usually when I got lazy with my grip.

Jade and I kept at it for another half hour, firing down the range until I felt like we'd gotten our fill—and burned through more than enough ammo that wasn't even ours.

My hands were completely numb from all the shooting, the only reason I could keep going was because I alternated between my right and left hands, making full use of my [Ambidexterity] Skill to maximise the grind.

And what a grind it had been!

Pulling up the System Notifications, I couldn't help but smile at the progress.

Numbers had gone brrr and I loved it!

[System]: 600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for [Pistols] Skill.

[System]: 400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for [Firearms] Skill.

[System]: [Firearms] Skill has reached Level 1. Muscle Memory and Knowledge Download available.

[System]: 300xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

I had decided to finish out the Level on [Firearms] before calling it quits for today, figuring that having both [Pistols] and it at Level 1 was going to be a lot more useful than leaving it at 0 for who knows how long.

Jade had taken a lot more breaks between rounds on the lane, giving her right hand time to recover. I noticed she was cradling it slightly when she thought I wasn't looking—clearly, the wound she had from my last data collection run was still bothering her.

I felt a pang of guilt, remembering how things had gone south the last time we were out together; even if I hadn't exactly intended for her to be there at all.

'I'm sorry, Jade... I tried not to hit you,' I thought with a twinge of regret, recalling the chaos of that last mission. But there was no time to dwell on it—I mentally slapped myself back to the present.

My focus had to be on making sure this mission didn't end the same way.

After putting the pistols back where we found them and shutting down the range as best we could, I briefly considered pocketing one of the guns.

But I quickly dismissed the idea.

"Borrowing" some ammo for target practice when left alone was one thing, but outright stealing weapons was a whole different level of risky. Even Mr. Stirling could face serious heat if the store owner realised we'd swiped multiple guns, and we were here on his word, after all.

With that settled, we moved toward the back door.

I scanned the area for any signs of surveillance—cameras, sensors, anything that might give us a clue about what lay on the other side. I was still worried that the Golden Phoenix enforcers might have the place under watch, and I wanted to avoid any nasty surprises.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find anything that would help us see what was waiting outside.

I knew the place had to have some kind of security setup—no gun store in their right mind would be without it—but without asking the spooked store owner for help, we were flying blind. And I really did not want to have to track down the owner and potentially have to explain why there were thousands of rounds of ammunition missing.

It was always better to leave that kind of discovery for when you were no longer present.

With a heavy sigh, I gestured for Jade to move up, and together we gently pushed open the heavy plasteel door, stepping cautiously into the alley behind the gun store...