

Chapter 90 - Upgrades

Carefully stepping out of the elevator, I scanned the area for any signs of Golden Phoenix members lurking around. Logically, they shouldn't have been able to find us this quickly, but after everything that had happened, I wasn't about to take any chances.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, I gestured for Jade to follow me.

She trailed behind, quieter than usual, her usual spark dimmed under the weight of everything I'd just put her through. I couldn't exactly blame her—it had been one hell of a day, and I'd definitely pushed things farther than either of us had likely planned.

I led us into a nearby alley, tucked away from prying eyes but not too far from the elevators, wanting to get in a few more words before we went our separate ways.

Before I could start, my cerebral interface pinged with a welcome notification:

["Vega" has transferred {c}500 to your account with the note: "Pleasure doing business."]

Seeing those digits felt like a weight lifted.

I was officially richer than I'd ever been in this world—by a long shot—but there wasn't exactly time for a victory dance just yet. We stopped near the mouth of the alley, Jade still looking like she was working her way back from the whirlwind we'd just been through.

"Thanks for having my back out there," I started, my voice lighter, trying to ease the lingering tension between us.

I didn't want this whole thing to sour our working relationship—or whatever this strange, tentative partnership was. And maybe, just maybe, a small part of me wanted to keep the door open for something that resembled friendship, though I'd never say that out loud.

"I wasn't expecting things to go sideways like they did, or for it to end in... you know, a total shitshow. But you handled it like a pro, and I seriously appreciate that."

I caught the quick flash of disbelief on her face when I mentioned not wanting things to get violent. Given the two levels I'd snagged in [Intimidation] earlier, I could definitely see why she might find that hard to believe.

My performance in the alley had been... well, not exactly the behaviour of someone trying to *avoid* a fight. I'd gone straight from a botched negotiation, that had probably more looked like goading somebody into a fight, to immediately maiming someone in the blink of an eye, and there was no pretending otherwise.

My plan to smooth things over was clearly hitting a wall, so I switched tactics and leaned into a more direct approach—sometimes, you've just got to give it straight.

"You know, I couldn't help but notice your gear is kinda... *lacking*. Unless you just didn't think you'd run into any trouble today?" I prodded, hoping to open the conversation without sounding too harsh.

Jade didn't miss a beat, her response immediate and sharper than I expected. "Nope, this is the best I've got. I'm not stupid enough to go on any mission without bringing my best stuff; that's how you get seriously hurt or fucking killed."

Her tone had a bite to it, a spark of defiance that I hadn't quite seen in her earlier, more reserved demeanour. It caught me off guard, but it was exactly the kind of honesty I needed from her.

Underneath the snippy tone, though, her words were a goldmine. This was an opportunity.

I knew that after settling my debts, I'd still have about 300 credits left—plenty to invest in myself and maybe extend a small olive branch to Jade. If I wanted to keep working with her and maybe build something long-term with the Clawed Beasts, getting her to gear herself up properly was a no-brainer.

"Alright, then," I said, letting [Accounting] run the numbers in my head quickly. "Next time we go out, we're getting you some proper gear. I've got a contact who sells quality stuff for cheap—the same place I got all the gear I'm wearing right now from. And you've probably seen how good this stuff is. Bring whatever creds you've got, and we'll sort you out. You heard Vega: If you're gonna be tagging along on future missions, I can't risk you getting hurt. I'm not interested in catching heat from him just 'cause *your* stuff's garbage."

My words were blunt, maybe even a little harsh, but I needed Jade to get that this wasn't about Vega's threat alone. I couldn't afford to have her think I was folding just because Vega had rattled my cage. Sure, his warning was still fresh in my mind and I was pretty scared of whatever consequences Vega had access to, but, ultimately, this was about making sure she could keep up and keep herself safe—yes, definitely that.

Her eyes widened a bit when I mentioned taking her to my contact, which was exactly the kind of reaction I'd been hoping for.

If I could not only get on Jade's good side but also create a connection between Misha's Emporium and the Clawed Beasts, it would be a win all around. Plus, Misha deserved more regular customers than just me, and I could keep an eye on how things went. Being able to speak Gryplik meant I could pick up on any subtle hints if something wasn't sitting right with Misha—even if she didn't say it outright.

No one was going to mess with her on my watch.

"Ehh... O—Okay. Should I... Do we go now, or...?" Jade asked, her tone a mix of confusion, nerves, and just a touch of excitement.

Bingo.

“Nah, not right now,” I waved her off. “I’ve got to turn in this data-shard that got us into all this mess first. And you need to get that gun to Vega before he flips out thinking you died or something.”

That got a small chuckle out of her—didn’t see that coming, but I wasn’t about to complain.

“I’ll hit you up when I’ve got my stuff sorted out. Save up some creds till then, maybe borrow some if you can swing a good deal. See you soon, Jade. Stay safe.”

I realised I was laying the goodbye on way too thick, making things awkward real fast, so I spun on my heel and booked it, walking off at a brisk pace that screamed “totally chill, not awkward at all.”

Hopefully, Jade would just see it as me trying to be nice and not... whatever this mess was.

I couldn’t help but replay the last few moments in my mind, second-guessing every little word. But hey, she did laugh at my Vega joke, right? That had to count for *something*.

Deciding not to spend more time thinking about it, I headed straight for the restricted elevators and made my way up to the 43rd floor, sending a brief message to Mr. Stirling on the way to let him know I was coming to hand in the data-shard.

It was finally time to hand in this god-forsaken Task and grab my rewards...!

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“Why is it that every time I send you out for a simple data retrieval, you come back looking like you’ve just survived a horde of scavs...?” Mr. Stirling asked, holding the door open and motioning for me to come inside. “And judging by that grin on your face, I’m guessing not all of this is yours? You’re not hurt, are you?”

He nodded toward the same couch I’d crashed on last time, giving me a quick once-over.

One of his eyebrows shot up in surprise as he took in my gear. “Not bad... Not bad at all.”

“Yeah, about that whole blood thing—none of it’s mine. Didn’t take a scratch,” I replied smugly, trying to give him a reassuring thumbs-up. Except I forgot that my arm was heavily bruised, so it ended up being more of a half-hearted thumbs-up and a wince. “Ouch... Right, so I did take a *hit* on the arm. Didn’t break through the jacket, so it doesn’t really count, but I’m pretty sure the bone’s cracked or something—not totally sure.”

Mr. Stirling’s expression shifted from his usual cool, calculating demeanour to something unexpectedly gentle as he stepped closer to inspect my arm. He carefully manoeuvred my jacket off my shoulder, wincing slightly as he caught sight of the bruising that had spread all the way down to my wrist.

“Yup, looks like you’ve got a crack in there,” he confirmed, his tone almost fatherly. “Doesn’t look displaced, but it’s definitely not great. Let’s get that sorted.”

He moved over to a nearby cabinet and pulled out a sleek-looking med kit, flipping it open with practised ease. From the kit, he grabbed a small vial of something labelled “Nexisyn Gel”—a bright, iridescent blue substance that looked more like high-end nail polish than medicine.

He loaded it into a sleek applicator that resembled a cross between a syringe and a fancy vape pen, positioning it just above the bruised area on my arm.

I was half-inclined to tell him to save it, considering that my Rest Function would take care of the problem in just 8-hours of time, but then again, I couldn’t exactly tell him that. Nor would I be able to hide this level of rapid healing from Jade or Mr. Stirling himself, if I constantly skipped out on stuff like this.

“This stuff will help with the pain and speed up the healing,” he explained as he injected the gel into my skin, a cool, tingling sensation spreading through my arm. “Now, hold still while I get you bandaged up.”

As he wrapped my arm tightly in a silver-infused bandage that seemed to mould itself snugly around the injury, he glanced up at me. “So, how’d the mission go? You’re back in one piece, which is always a good start.”

I nodded and reached into my jacket with my free hand, pulling out the data-shard case and handing it to him. Mr. Stirling’s eyes lit up momentarily as he took it, carefully setting it on the table behind him without even looking at it twice—his priority was clearly getting me patched up first.

“It was a bit of a ride,” I started, trying to keep the explanation as straightforward as possible. “Retrieval was easy enough, just like you said it would be. I brought backup along, just in case. But on our way out, we ran into some Golden Phoenix enforcers—bad timing on our part, really. Or rather; theirs.”

Mr. Stirling paused mid-bandage, his expression darkening slightly. “Enforcers? They weren’t supposed to be around the store often...”

“Yeah... I honestly don’t know,” I continued, watching as he resumed securing my arm. “Jade and I had to duck into the store to lose them. I used the code you gave me to get the shopkeep to help us out. We used the shooting range in the back to buy some time.”

I tried to gloss over the shooting range part quickly, but I could feel his gaze sharpen, a knowing look passing over his face.

He didn’t call me out directly, just gave a slight shake of his head, as if he’d seen this story play out a hundred times before. “Using a shooting range to lay low, huh...? Riiight, then... Hope you didn’t run up too much of a tab.”

I shrugged, trying to play it off as no big deal. “Didn’t *break* anything if that’s what you’re worried about. And we didn’t steal anything either.”

“Right, right,” he muttered, his tone heavy with amusement as he finished taping down the last bit of bandage. “And the enforcers?”

“Yeah, about that,” I said, exhaling deeply. “We managed to slip out the back, but they found us again in the alley. Things got messy. Had to fight our way out—ended up taking out most of their crew before we could get away. Didn’t kill anyone, but things got... Well, bloody.”

I gestured towards my general outfit that was positively covered in blood splatters.

Mr. Stirling finished his work, giving my arm a final once-over before stepping back, arms crossed and brow furrowed. “You’re an absolute fucking magnet for trouble, aren’t you?”

“Hey, trouble found *me* first. *And* I warned them!” I shot back with a grin, flexing my newly bandaged arm experimentally. The Nexisyn Gel was already working wonders, the pain dulled down to a manageable throb.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what everyone says,” Mr. Stirling shot back, waving me off dismissively as he tucked his medkit back into its cabinet. He turned his attention to the data-shard case, picking it up with a practised ease and giving it a once-over, his eyes flickering with a mix of curiosity and calculation.

He removed the shard from its case and slotted it in after a brief, secondary inspection and took a seat on his cushioned chair across the coffee table from me.

I couldn’t deny that I was absolutely dying to know what kind of secrets were hidden in all these shards I’d been hauling for him. But I also knew better than to let that curiosity get the better of me. Corporate espionage on this level was way above my pay grade, and I had zero interest in getting tangled up in that mess beyond playing the role of the courier.

The last thing I needed was to poke my nose where it didn’t belong and end up on someone’s hit list, especially considering how many dangerous lines I was already treading.

As I sat there, waiting for Mr. Stirling to wrap up his evaluation of the data-shard, I figured I might as well use the downtime productively—especially since I hadn’t been paid yet, and I still wanted to pick his brain for some advice.

I quickly dove into the System notifications that were still pending in the back of my mind.

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

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

[System]: *100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

‘*That’s a lot of experience for a quick chat with Vega,*’ I mused, feeling more than a little surprised by the numbers. Not that I was about to complain about some extra progress.

The sheer amount of experience I’d racked up in the past couple of hours was kind of mind-blowing, and it left me wondering what *exactly* was fueling these gains.

I’d always known the System rewarded taking risks, but I hadn’t quite realised the sheer *extent* of that reward.

I'd expected maybe a little bump—like the 50% boost you'd get with a [Mentor Bonus]—but this was on a whole other level. Even with that kind of bonus, I wouldn't have earned anywhere near this much experience.

'The risk-reward system's way more generous than I thought... and it's clearly dropping the experience thresholds,' I thought, piecing together the data from earlier. The amount of experience I'd pulled from the street brawl was leagues ahead of what I'd get from a session at Miss K's dojo, and that realisation felt like a game-changer.

My [Accounting] Skill, usually just sitting on the bench, was proving itself pretty useful for sorting all the numbers without me even needing to try—another unexpected perk of today's chaos.

With that analysis stashed away for now, I figured the key takeaway was simple: Taking risks was the way to fast-track experience gains. There wasn't much else I could do with that info just yet, but it was good to have that firmly planted in my mind for the future.

Turning my attention back to the outstanding System downloads that I'd put off during the elevator ride—[Pistols], [CQC], [First-Aid], and [Martial Arts]—I decided it was time to knock those out while I had the chance.

A quick glance at Mr. Stirling told me he was still deep in his own world with the data-shard, so I queued up the easier downloads first, starting with [CQC] and [First-Aid].

As I accepted the download for [CQC], I felt the familiar, slightly unnerving rush of data flooding into my brain.

My senses sharpened as the System carved new pathways into my mind, embedding the fundamentals of close-quarters combat. It was like watching a rapid-fire tutorial in my head—flashes of movements, grips, and techniques playing out in a dizzying montage.

The first level of [CQC] was all about the essentials: Unarmed strikes, basic grapples, and understanding the leverage you could gain with even the most rudimentary and commonly used weapons.

I could feel the slight shift in my posture as the muscle memory settled in, subtly correcting my general stance and positioning that would allow me to react faster to unexpected attacks—small tweaks that I hadn't even realised were wrong before.

I also now knew how to keep my centre of gravity low without unbalancing myself, and angle my body to minimise openings when facing multiple enemies at once—that one would have been really useful to know earlier today, System!

It was like having a basic cheat sheet for survival in a brawl, but it went beyond just fists and feet as well. The knowledge also introduced how knives, bats, and other close-combat weapons could alter the flow of a fight.

I could instinctively gauge the reach advantage of a bat, the dangers of a knife, and the split-second decision-making needed when firearms came into the mix at point-blank range.

It didn't make me a pro by any means, but the newfound awareness of how these weapons could change the dynamics of a skirmish was beyond enlightening and something I was regretting not having had access to earlier today.

The knowledge and muscle memory would have definitely made a big difference in the altercation with the enforcers; maybe even to the point that I wouldn't have gotten hurt at all.

Next came the download for [First-Aid], bumping me up to Level 2.

This one hit different—less brutal overall, but no less intense.

My mind buzzed with a flurry of medical information, practical techniques that went beyond the absolute basics. It wasn't just bandaging a wound anymore or assessing somebody for their overall state; it was about doing it quickly and efficiently, even under the worst of conditions.

I could feel the knowledge embedding itself in real-time—applying a tourniquet without cutting off too much circulation, assessing a wound to determine if it needed sutures, or knowing when and how to apply a clotting agent to an otherwise lethal wound.

My hands tingled with phantom sensations, practising the techniques that would keep someone from bleeding out before real help could arrive.

I could practically feel the difference in tension when applying pressure to a wound versus when splinting a broken limb. The System fed me scenarios on how to stabilise a fracture with whatever materials were at hand, how to quickly identify and manage shock, and even the proper way to move an injured person without making their condition worse.

It was like cramming a primer on battlefield medicine into my brain in a matter of seconds, and the rush of knowledge left my head buzzing.

I took a deep, shaky breath, letting all that new info and muscle memory settle like dust after a storm.

There was always this odd, unsettling feeling after a System download, like my brain and muscles were rewired on the fly to react to experiences I hadn't actually lived through.

It was trippy, sure, but also kind of amazing—and definitely addicting!

There were probably ethical debates to be had about this kind of instant learning—stuff philosophers would argue over for days, like the whole “nature vs. nurture” argument dialled up to eleven.

But lucky for me, I wasn't exactly the philosophical type.

I didn't have time to ponder the existential implications of becoming a pseudo-expert overnight either, considering the amount of stuff that was seemingly brewing just beyond the horizon of my very limited reach in this world so far.

I loved my System shortcuts, and there was no way I'd turn down that kind of edge, no matter how weird it felt at times.

I glanced over at Mr. Stirling, still deep in his analysis of the shard I'd handed over. He was frowning at something outside of my view, absorbed in whatever intel was scrolling by, which meant I had a little more time to deal with the rest of my System business.

Perfect.

Time to give [Pistols] and [Martial Arts] the upgrades they deserved.

The [Pistols] download came first and this time it wasn't just the basics.

It dove deeper than the first-level one, smoothing out the rough edges of my earlier experience at the shooting range.

I felt my shooting stance adjust subtly as if my body knew exactly how to distribute my weight to absorb recoil more efficiently and how to tighten my grip just right, locking the gun in place without losing control.

Even reloading was something that I instinctively knew had just become smoother, more natural, whether I was standing still or on the move. It wasn't just about handling a gun safely anymore; it was about *using* it with purpose and efficiency in real-world situations.

The kind of muscle memory that would make me a lot more dangerous the next time I found myself with a gun in hand—whenever that next time would be.

But then came the [Martial Arts] download, and it was clear right away that I probably should've waited until I was alone for this one.

The surge of information and muscle memory downright *slammed* into me, and I felt my muscles instantly beginning to twitch and spasm, like they were being reprogrammed on the fly by a mad scientist's contraption—which, in a way, I guess they literally were.

Going from Level 2 to Level 3 was no joke, and I made a mental note to never make this mistake again when upgrading from pre-mastery to beginner-mastery.

Skills in Neon Dragons all had a pretty similar structure:

Levels 0-2 covered the absolute basics, like what you'd get in the first couple of months in a high school or college course on the topic.

But hitting Level 3? That was a whole different game.

Level 3 marked the shift into "beginner-mastery"—where you went from fumbling novice to someone who could at least hold their own.

It was like completing that course or a year's worth of focused training, putting you solidly in the "competent" category, though still miles away from being considered professional.

For [Martial Arts], that meant the System was cramming an entire year of dojo-level training into my brain and muscles in just a few seconds. Sure, it wasn't *anywhere* near the level of intensity or precision that Miss K would've drilled into me, but the sheer *amount* of knowledge and muscle memory being forced into my body was no joke.

Flashes of techniques, stances, and strategies whizzed past my mind's eye.

I learned how to harness the right flow of energy when landing a punch, furthering the knowledge and muscle memory I had gathered myself in Miss K's dojo, how to pivot my hips for maximum force in a kick, and the delicate balance shifts needed to stay grounded during an opponent's counter.

It wasn't just about throwing hands either; it was about reading a fight like a story, spotting openings I wouldn't have noticed before, and knowing exactly when and where to disrupt an opponent's rhythm to turn the tables.

Even some select techniques from a wide range of martial arts styles were covered, giving me a very basic but versatile toolkit that I could adapt to whatever fight I found myself in next.

By the time it was over, I was left panting, my muscles still spasming as they adjusted to the flood of new patterns.

I secretly hoped Mr. Stirling had been too absorbed in his work to notice me essentially seizing up on his couch, but the fact that he was standing in front of me with a seriously concerned look on his face was very subtly hinting towards the fact that that was not, in-fact, the case.

"I'm okay," I managed to get out between shaky breaths, my voice not doing me any favours in convincing him. "Seriously, I'm fine! No need to worry!"

"Whatever the fuck *that* was, it is definitely *not* fine, Sera," Mr. Stirling shot back, his tone shifting firmly into the "don't even think about arguing" territory. "Did you get hit in the head during that fight with the enforcers? You sure it's just your arm that's busted?"

He leaned closer, his fingers carefully feeling around the back of my head, down to my neck where my cerebral link was embedded. "I'm checking your link to make sure it didn't get damaged. That shit just now looked like a full-on seizure."

I had two choices: Let him do his thing and inspect the link, which should be fine aside from some leftover netrunning burnout, or try to talk my way out of it. But with my brain feeling like it had been put through a blender and the room still doing a slow spin, I knew my silver tongue wasn't about to bail me out this time.

Resigning myself to the less troublesome option, I sat up straighter, though it felt like trying to balance on a tightrope, and angled my head slightly to give Mr. Stirling better access.

His hands carefully ran over the metal implant, pressing and prodding for any signs of external damage. Satisfied, he let out a low grumble, grabbed a data pad from the table, and yanked a link cable from its port.

"I'm running some basic diagnostics. Don't freak out." His tone made it clear this wasn't a request—it was happening whether I liked it or not.

'Great job, Sera, you absolute fucking blank,' I berated myself internally, facepalming in my mind. *'New rule: No more accepting downloads unless you're alone at home. You can't keep pulling this shit around people and think it'll just be fine.'*

While Mr. Stirling focused on his diagnostics, I figured I might as well make the most of the downtime. I pulled up the Perk options for [Martial Arts], ready to dig into the next level of perks now that I was stuck in my makeshift doctor's office.

Might as well be productive while getting a free check-up, right?

[Immovable Defense] (Martial Arts)

You Shall Not Pass! — Unlock the combined defensive stances of Aikido, Judo, Wing Chun, and Karate. Absorb and redirect the energy of incoming melee attacks and grapples, making you an immovable force on the battlefield. Your stance turns an enemy's aggression into controlled power, resisting all attempts to be moved or unbalanced.

[Ruthless Offense] (Martial Arts)

Power Overwhelming! — Master the aggressive stances of Kung Fu, Muay Thai, and Kickboxing to unleash a relentless barrage of strikes and kicks. Each hit naturally flows into the next, creating a seamless offensive rhythm that overwhelms enemies, forcing them to trade blows or face relentless pressure.

[Shadow Assault] (Martial Arts)

Nin-Nin! — Combine the precision stances of Ninjutsu, Krav Maga, and Kenpo to execute surprise attacks with lethal accuracy. Your strikes are executed with deadly efficiency, making them far harder for enemies to evade or block, allowing you to strike from the shadows with unparalleled effectiveness.

[Brutal Mobility] (Martial Arts)

Stand Still for Just One Goddamn Second! — Blend the highly dynamic movements of Capoeira with the ruthless efficiency of Silat. This perk enables a combat style that is fluid and unpredictable, using constant movement to keep enemies off balance while delivering brutal, pragmatic strikes that disrupt and dismantle foes on the move.

[Elemental Balance] (Martial Arts)

Tranquil as a Silent Lake. — Master the harmonious techniques of Tai Chi, Aikido, Zen Meditation, and Yoga, granting you perfect adaptability to any environment. Whether on narrow ledges, beneath a raging waterfall, or amidst an earthquake, maintain absolute balance and control, allowing you to move with precision no matter the terrain or environmental conditions.

I had to fight the urge to whistle aloud at the options that popped up, because the last thing I needed was to give Mr. Stirling another reason to think my brain was scrambled beyond repair.

'This is... absolutely bonkers. I don't just get access to one martial art, but multiple? And they're all mashed together into some kind of hybrid style? That seems... excessive, right?' I thought, trying to wrap my head around what I was seeing.

It felt too good to be true.

There was no way they'd actually hand over the full depth of these martial arts—it would be like cramming decades of training, knowledge, and experience into my brain in one go.

This was a T1 Perk, after all—the lowest tier.

Odds were, I'd just be getting select techniques or principles from each one, not the full package. But still, the sheer potential of what was on the table had me buzzing.

I barely even knew what most of these styles entailed beyond the basics everyone picks up from movies and pop culture, but the possibilities were still mind-blowing.

'I'm gonna need Miss K's input on this,' I quickly realised, shelving the Perk selection for later.

I wasn't about to make any decisions without a little guidance from the one person who not only actually knew what she was doing in that regard, but who was also semi-aware of the System inside my head. She was quite literally the perfect person to ask about this.

Between the Perks and the Skill Point I'd be scoring once Mr. Stirling signed off on my Task, I was stacking up some serious upgrades today.

My skill set was getting a whole new glow-up, and I hadn't even fully cashed in yet...