

Chapter 45 - Second Data Collection

Inside the elevator that was making its way to the 33rd floor, I found myself meticulously reviewing Mr. Stirling's information packet one more time.

'Alright, I've got my emergency exit routes down pat, the pick-up location is clearly highlighted, and the code for the cache holding the shard is memorised,' I ticked off each crucial point in my head. *'Everything **seems** in order. Hopefully, this mission will be as smooth as the previous one.'*

Yet, a persistent sense of unease nagged at me, a shadow of doubt that I couldn't quite dismiss.

Unlike my previous task, where I was acutely aware of being out of my element, this time brought a different *kind* of anxiety. It was as if something was amiss, something crucial that I was failing to see. This subtle apprehension, hidden beneath my well-laid plans, left me feeling unsettled as the elevator continued its ascent, regardless of how much I tried to reassure myself that I had everything covered.

Having ensured my spot at the elevator's rear upon setting the 33rd floor as my destination, I took the opportunity to slip into my Pseudo-Tier 1 bomber jacket and scarf.

These items, meticulously folded and violently crumpled to occupy minimal space, had been packed into the first bag I could find at home. Driven by the urgency to tackle the second instalment of my debt repayment head-on, I had chosen to bring the essentials along, bypassing the need for a return trip home to gear up—a decision aimed at maximising my time efficiency, especially given the pressing need to advance my [Quick-Hacks] Skill.

Regrettably, my Pseudo-Tier 1 cargo pants were left behind; their bulkiness defied my best efforts to fit them into the small, plastic bag I'd chosen—I had tried. A lot.

'It should work out, nonetheless...' I mentally reassured myself, attempting to quell the burgeoning anxiety within me once again.

I figured that this unease, perhaps, stemmed from the deviation in my preparatory routine for this mission as opposed to the previous one. I could definitely see how the omission of even a single piece of equipment could feel like an unsettling departure from the familiar, adding a layer of discomfort to my mental state.

Yet, regardless of my internal reservations, my commitment to the task at hand remained unwavering. With my mental schedule tightly packed with virtual sessions with Kill Joy's alter-ego and intensive [Quick-Hacks] training marked as "all day, every day, once available," there was no turning back now.

The last thing I did was to move my knife holster slightly more towards the left side.

Ever since I had acquired [Ambidexterity], I had started to come up with a rough plan for how to make best use of it, starting with the very basic question of "Which hand should I use for combat primarily?"

The answer had been more complex than I had first anticipated, going through it in my mind, but the general idea was very simple: There are vastly less lefties than righties, so most people will expect your main hand to be your right one.

Capitalising on this presumption, I intentionally configured my Operator gear in direct contrast to my usual setup, which favoured a right-handed approach, preparing my knife for a left-handed draw instead.

This minor modification, while perhaps negligible to the keen eye of a seasoned fighter—like Mr. Stirling, who had effortlessly noted the exact location and type of my knife during our first post-shopping encounter, despite never having a chance to see it—could be a game-changer against less experienced adversaries or those who might underestimate me.

In situations where every split-second and element of surprise counted, this could very well be the deciding factor between life and death. The fact that it required no extra effort or cost to implement this adjustment made it an unquestionably smart and necessary alteration in my eyes.

Now fully prepared and equipped, I went over the mission-data one last time, finishing just shortly before the elevator finally reached the 33rd floor, after half a dozen stops at different floors.

As the elevator doors slid open, I pushed my way through the crowd to step out, immediately struck by a sight that felt eerily familiar.

A bold emblem caught my eye, showcasing a stylized combination of F and I, intertwined with patterns resembling circuitry, set against a backdrop that shimmered in shades of blue and black—or perhaps white and gold under a different light.

This was the mark of Falkum Industries, the very corporation under Mr. Stirling's microscope.

This setting brought a sense of déjà vu, reminiscent of my encounter on the 31st floor, which had been under the dominion of Rockefeller Inc. There, too, I was met with a grand display of corporate identity, where the emblem took centre stage, relegating the floor's other visual elements to mere supporting roles.

Such deliberate branding seemed to be a strategic move, especially on floors like the 33rd and 31st, designated for public access and marked as shopping havens in the elevators of the megabuilding.

By dominating the visual landscape with their emblems, these corporations ensured that visitors' attention was continuously drawn back to them, embedding their presence in the minds of shoppers. It was a very on-the-nose form of corporate advertising, but one that was extremely common-place in this world, if my countless hours of Neon Dragons playthroughs and Let's Plays were anything to go by.

Even in this world, no corporation could go without an ever-increasing churn of workers to replace the ones that had been used up and spit out.

Stepping away from the elevator, I immediately picked up on a notable, and extremely welcome, difference from my previous foray onto a corporation-controlled floor—this time, there was no security checkpoint to pass through.

Falkum Industries, it appeared, didn't place as much emphasis on security measures as Rockefeller Inc did, which aligned perfectly with the nature of their business.

While Rockefeller Inc. delved into the realms of weaponry and armour, catering to high-tech military applications, Falkum Industries charted a different course. They were in the medical field, echoing the pursuits of Ether Labs with their focus squarely on pharmaceuticals, bionics, and cybernetics instead of the more martial-focused inventory of Rockefeller Inc.

This distinction was evident right from the get-go, as the first few stores I encountered were pharmacies and apothecaries, showcasing an extensive range of medications for all to see.

I couldn't help but wonder if these stores were strategically placed near the elevators to immediately set the tone for Falkum Industries' corporate image, or if it was just a coincidence at this particular entrance, that I just so happened to have chosen at random.

Navigating the floor, I stumbled upon the first intersection, where I observed several private military contractors sporting the Falkum emblem. Their demeanour varied from sheer boredom to keen vigilance, tasked with maintaining order on the premises. Each of them was armed with an array of clearly non-lethal gear, including batons, stun-knuckles, and even one of them even sporting a baseball bat, which caught me off guard.

However, what truly stood out was the very real-looking firearms each guard carried at their side—pistols, judging from my somewhat limited understanding of firearms.

This indicated that despite Falkum Industries' primary focus on medical technologies, they didn't take security lightly on their shopping floors either.

In a world where corporate reputation was paramount, maintaining stringent security was essential. Any lapse could tarnish their public image, providing an opportunity for rival corporations to capitalise on their missteps and take over their market position in a matter of days—all it took was a single spark to light the fire of a corporation's downfall, and Falkum Industries seemed very aware of that.

'Seems like they've also stationed guards at key points, much like Rockefeller Inc... Good to know,' I thought, updating my map with a little warning icon at every intersection, preparing for any scenario where things might take an unexpected turn.

As I continued to meander through the bustling thoroughfare of the 33rd floor, taking in the varied assortment of shops and boutiques, a notable contrast to the 31st floor's layout emerged, marking another distinct philosophy between Falkum Industries and Rockefeller Inc.

Unlike the 31st floor, which presented itself as an expansive commercial haven dedicated solely to retail, the 33rd floor wove residential units amidst its commercial tapestry. Blocks of apartments were interspersed among the stores, some areas leaning heavily residential with only a sparse scattering of commercial ventures.

This architectural divergence highlighted a fundamental difference in vision; Rockefeller Inc. aimed to craft a shopping-centric oasis, akin to a sprawling, mid-level mall, whereas Falkum Industries appeared to champion a mixed-use approach, echoing the dynamic pulse of inner-city living reminiscent of my previous life. This blend of living spaces and commerce lent the floor a more integrated, community-like feel, to some degree.

However, from a tactical standpoint, the inclusion of residential areas presented a slight complication for me.

The stretches dominated by apartments thinned the crowds, diminishing the opportunities to merge seamlessly with a throng of people for cover. Should the need arise to evade any potential pursuers, the denser, shop-laden areas would offer vastly better camouflage.

I made a mental note to prioritise these bustling commercial zones as potential havens and marked the blocks that I could see, which featured primarily apartments, in yellow on my map.

'It's like I'm drafting the first-ever guide to floor 33, pinpointing all perilous spots and areas of interest, for my non-existent guildmates,' I reflected, amusement lacing my internal monologue.

The way I methodically went through each area and marked them on my map, truly did feel like playing one of those older games that didn't have an automatic map feature or any quest markers. Pen and paper was all I had now—well, except it was a digital map in my cerebral interface, taken from a scan of the floor; and I was marking it with a mere thought, rather than a pen.

But still, it was basically the same!

I made no haste to get towards my mission area, taking a book out of every spy movie I had ever watched, by simply pretending to be another strolling citizen. I even stopped and looked at some stores at times, rarely even entering and taking a closer look at a random item here or there, before returning back to my walk towards the data collection point.

While I wanted to get this over and done with fast, in order to get back to my [Quick-Hacks] lessons as soon as possible, I was not going to risk anything by being sloppy here—I had spent too much time mulling over and preparing for this task to mess it up on the last steps.

Ultimately, however, no matter how slow I walked, how many stores I checked and how much I tried to blend into the crowd, I still could not shake the feeling of anxiety in my chest. It felt as if I was perpetually being watched by someone, yet I knew that that was downright impossible, considering the myriad steps I had taken to shake off any suspicion on me ever since entering the floor.

For any potential observers, there was no shot they wouldn't think I'm just a random shopper.

With the unease refusing to let up, I simply had to resort to shovelling it into the back of my mind, in order to fully concentrate on the mission at hand. Whatever was causing this perpetual anxiety would have to simply wait to be dealt with until after I was done here...

About an hour and a half into my trip to the 33rd floor, I finally reached the block that held the mission objective. I was still quite a few buildings away, but my alertness heightened drastically as I realised that I was about to properly start working on the task.

I had spent a vast amount of time pretending to be a shopper, but now it was time to drop that act and get fully into Operator-mode.

I swerved off of the thoroughfare into a nearby alley between two apartments—specifically chosen as it wouldn't have any passerby linger around, unlike alleys between shops. I quickly made my way further into the alley, around halfway, before I ducked behind a few trash containers and waited.

'Let's see if somebody was following me after all,' I thought to myself as my heart started beating quicker. I wanted to make absolutely sure that my next moves weren't seen by anyone, as I had come up with a gameplan to scout out the drop-off area before I had to go there myself.

I waited for around ten minutes, hidden behind the trash containers that blocked any view from outside the alley to my front and back, but I heard nothing, nor saw anyone trying to check where I was.

My Edge had reached 3 just shortly before my [Stealth] Skill had and the knowledge I had gained and gathered from before combined told me in no uncertain terms that this was definitely not a surefire way to detect anyone that might be shadowing me, but it was a good start to try and spook out any less patient pursuers.

For my purposes, that was good enough.

I didn't think that anybody was following me, but I wanted to make sure to do at least the absolute minimum necessary to make sure I wasn't. I was stepping on dangerous ground with this whole corporate espionage topic, after all.

"Okay, Sera, let's do this," I encouraged myself, pausing to glance at the apartment to my left. The architecture within the megabuilding brought its own set of quirks, and my plan hinged on one such peculiarity.

Unlike traditional structures where apartments stretch to match the floor's height, contributing to the building's overall structural stability, megabuildings in Neon Dragons defied this norm quite a number of times.

While many apartments *did* stack one atop another within a vast single floor—mimicking conventional apartment blocks—some ended abruptly, not reaching the ceiling at all.

This anomaly, while initially baffling to me, considering it contradicted everything I understood about building design, proved to be extremely beneficial for what I had in mind.

Dashing towards the wall, I propelled my left foot against it with intent.

Instantly, the sensation was surreal; the [Wall Runner] Perk activated, creating a bizarre feeling as if gravity itself had shifted beneath me. It felt like the world had tilted, with the wall now the floor under my feet, and the pull of gravity now guided my ascent along the apartment's side.

I felt the intangible, internal reservoir of the Perk's energy starting to deplete quickly, a clear indicator of the duration that remained on my vertical sprint. Despite the disorienting shift, my enhanced physical capabilities, bolstered by my Body attribute now at a 4, allowed me to quickly scale the structure within the roughly three-second window provided by the Perk.

Reaching the rooftop brought a wash of relief over me.

It was just as I had predicted: A flat expanse reminiscent of the rooftop gatherings and secret rendezvous depicted in films from my previous life, minus any dramatic, smoking figures silhouetted against the skyline.

While I had mentally rehearsed several flimsy justifications for my presence here, anticipating the potential need to explain my unconventional approach to any onlookers, the empty rooftop rendered my preparations unnecessary.

My relief was more than palpable, spared from the embarrassment of weaving tales that relied more on the shock factor than any type of coherence that could be found.

'Alright, part one of the plan was a success with no complications. Good shit,' I congratulated myself as I took some deep breaths to calm my beating heart.

Running up an entire apartment building, even if it had only been around 15 metres tall, had been exhilarating beyond belief. [Wall Runner] was a ludicrous Perk that made a complete joke of any laws of physics that I knew of.

Making my way cautiously across the roof, I advanced towards the edge overlooking the thoroughfare below. This segment of the floor, marked by its scarcity of shops, naturally experienced a lower volume of pedestrians.

It made sense why Mr. Stirling's contact had selected this locale for the drop-off—a strategic choice to minimise the risk of unwanted attention. Peering down into the alley that was my final destination, where the data-shard was cleverly concealed, my eyes scanned the environment for any signs of the cache.

But the moment my gaze landed on the designated spot, my body tensed, adrenaline surging anew.

Below, in the very alley where the data-shard awaited, a group was already present, their actions unmistakable. They were searching, meticulously inspecting every nook and cranny with a purpose that suggested they were well aware of what they hoped to find.

The sight of these individuals, clearly not just passersby but individuals with an intent that could dangerously intersect with my own mission, sent a chill down my spine.

My mind raced, evaluating options.

Approaching them was out of the question—the risk of confrontation was too high, and with my current equipment, Attributes and Skills, I wasn't prepared for a direct encounter.

Observing from the rooftop offered a vantage point, but it also left me exposed to anyone who might glance upwards; unlikely to occur, but still a possibility.

For a moment, I considered retreating, re-evaluating my approach entirely or maybe even asking Mr. Stirling for advice, but I had already gotten so far by myself, that I didn't quite want to take this step yet. I didn't know how asking the "quest-giver", so to speak, for assistance would affect my Task rewards from the System either.

I could not afford to risk losing a full General Skill Point, simply because I got spooked by some complications.

Silently, I crouched, minimising my silhouette against the ceiling behind me, eyes locked on the group below. I needed to understand their pattern, identify a moment of opportunity when their attention was elsewhere.

The mission wasn't just about a simple retrieval and delivery anymore; it was now about doing so undetected, outsmarting those who might have their own claims on the data-shard.

'Alright, think, Sera. There's gotta be a way to get the shard,' I whispered to myself, steeling my nerves for the next phase of this unexpected change of plans.

For starters, I needed more information.

Without understanding their purpose or connection to the shard, any action I took would be a massive gamble. So, there I was, lying flat on the rooftop, carefully observing the group in the alleyway from my concealed vantage point for god knows how long this was going to take—so much for getting back to my [Quick-Hacks] on the quick...

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For what felt like an eternity but was only about thirty minutes, I scrutinised their every move, trying to decipher their intentions.

The breakthrough came when one of them unearthed the hidden cache around twenty minutes into my observations, confirming my suspicion—they were indeed after the same data-shard I was tasked to retrieve.

My heart skipped a beat, but I forced myself to remain calm and continue watching.

They struggled with the cache, clearly lacking the necessary code to access it. This small yet crucial detail provided a glimmer of hope.

After several futile attempts at forcing it open, the dynamics within the group shifted, bringing a new character into the spotlight—a woman who pulled out a cyberdeck from her backpack with the confidence of someone who knew her way around such tech.

She was unmistakably the netrunner of their crew, further underscored by the obvious cybernetic implant on the right side of her temple.

This observation was both alarming and enlightening.

While it confirmed that the group was well-prepared and likely dangerous, it also highlighted their current limitation so far—they couldn't open the cache.

It gave me a window, albeit a small and risky one, to formulate a plan.

As luck would have it, the netrunner's easily irritable nature worked in my favour. Mere moments after she began her attempt to hack into the cache, her patience wore thin.

She erupted in frustration, barking at her companions to “fuck off to the other end of the alley,” demanding space to concentrate on her task.

This unexpected turn of events presented a golden opportunity to me. With the woman now isolated, a window for action cracked open.

I silently weighed my options, steeling my nerves for what I knew had to come next. Despite the risks, I couldn't pass up this chance.

'I'm gonna have to get in close and choke her out, so I can access the cache, get the shard and book it,' I consciously thought the words inside of my head, as if that would make me less anxious about the idea, somehow.

My recent progress in the Edge skill had not only deepened my understanding of stealth but also introduced me to some of the more shadow-y elements of combat.

Among these was a technique for incapacitating someone quietly from behind—something I obviously hadn't yet tested in the real world. However, I trusted the muscle memory the System had ingrained in me through its detailed knowledge downloads, as it always gave me perfect muscle memory, regardless of whether I had attempted an action before or not.

The real challenge, I knew, lay in the aftermath of my action.

Successfully neutralising the netrunner and securing the shard was one thing, and while definitely a hurdle for my current self, not impossible, but the potential fallout was another.

If she had set up any alarms, could make some sort of noise that I hadn't anticipated, or somehow alert her crew with her netrunning implant, I'd be in deep trouble.

But try as I might, I could not come up with a better plan on the quick.

I had to take this rare opportunity given to me by her irritable nature, regardless of the potential risks involved. If I waited any longer, the rest of the crew might get too antsy, or even worse, she might manage to break into the cache.

I had no idea how secure the cache was, after all. For all I knew it would only take her a handful of minutes to break through its security and crack it open like an egg, taking the data-shard from within and depriving me of my just rewards.

I crawled backwards away from the edge, then got up and looked for an easy way down into the alley I had previously come from. It would give me a nearly straight-shot towards the other alley, which would allow me to keep an eye on the woman during my approach.

I recognized quickly, however, that going down was a lot harder than going up.

I didn't have the [Climbing] Skill unlocked yet, much less at a level where it would actually help me, yet the thought of using [Wall Runner] to full-sprint down the side of the apartment, what was essentially a building, right towards the ground was something I could not really make work with my brain quite yet.

As such, I simply had to take it very slowly and carefully, trying my best to climb down from the roof of the apartment, taking intermittent breaks on outcrops and windowsills as best I could. Thanks to my very limited weight and above-average physical fitness, however, it ended up being surprisingly doable.

It only took me about three minutes to reach the ground again, perfectly hidden behind the large trash containers once again.

"Alright, Sera. It's showtime," I muttered to pump myself up, as I pulled the scarf above and around my head, like a sort of veil covering my entire head but the eyes.

There was a very real chance somebody might see me do this, so I wanted to reduce the chance of anyone being able to identify me. While there were a myriad of ways in this world to track somebody down, even without having seen their face, it would make it a lot harder for random people to do so.

I paused for a moment to ensure my knife was securely in place, still snug in its holster after my cautious descent. With a swift glance around, I moved through the alley, heading towards my target.

Ahead lay a side street I needed to cross to reach the alley where the cache was hidden.

Fortunately, this section of the block, sandwiched between apartment buildings, was sparsely populated. Few people ventured here, providing an ideal cover for my movements.

Peering around the alley's corner, I confirmed the coast was clear.

The only souls in sight were a trio already past me, their backs turned and moving further away. Gathering my nerves, I took a deep breath and dashed across the street, quickly slipping behind a cluster of trash containers that so readily dotted the alleyways in the megabuilding.

Freezing in place, I stilled every muscle and focused on my surroundings, my breaths shallow and silent. I strained my ears, listening intently for any hint of detection.

But all I could discern was the rush of adrenaline-fueled blood in my ears and the rapid thumping of my own heart. The quiet of the alley reassured me; for the moment, it seemed I had remained unseen.

Cautiously, I navigated around the edge of the trash container until the netrunner came back into view, her fingers dancing across her deck with a series of muttered curses.

'Seems like I'm still under the radar.'

The next phase was fraught with the highest risk as I needed to close the distance between us, ensuring I remained unseen by her companions and maintained absolute silence.

'At least I won't have to worry about what to do once I get there...' I thought to myself, going over the next steps of my plan.

The contact had hid the cache in a little cubby inside the alley. They had likely done so to protect it from spying eyes but now it was really going to come in handy in a different way, as I wouldn't have to worry about where to stash the woman temporarily.

Choking her out would only knock her out for about half a minute at best—something I had learned from Edge, that was entirely against everything I had learned from video games and movies—but I figured that it should be more than enough time to restrain her and start getting the data-shard out of the cache.

The alley stretched out for about 200 metres, with the netrunner roughly 40 metres away from my position. This left a considerable distance of 160 metres between her and her crew, which I estimated they could cover in 20 to 30 seconds, assuming no advanced cybernetic enhancements. They didn't appear to be the kind of people to possess anything beyond basic Tier 0, or *maybe* a rare Pseudo-Tier 1, cybernetics so my calculations were probably on the cautious side.

With another deep, calming breath, I set into motion, my footsteps light and nearly inaudible, aided by the finely tuned muscle memory from my recent advancement in the [Stealth] Skill to level 3.

Although I couldn't achieve complete silence, my movements were significantly quieter than the sound of the netrunner's typing, her crew's distant chatter, and her occasional swearing.

In just a few swift moments, I had closed the gap between us. She remained unaware of my presence as I tucked myself into the cubby right behind her, where she was intensely focused on the cache.

Without a moment's hesitation, knowing that my presence was unlikely to continue to be unnoticed by her, I allowed my Edge-induced muscle memory to guide me.

My hand swiftly covered her mouth to muffle any sound, while my other arm encircled her neck, applying firm pressure on her carotid artery.

The struggle was brief but intense.

The netrunner fought back with the expected level of vigour, trying desperately to throw me off.

However, the muscle memory I had acquired from Edge, combined with my Body of 4 closing the physical distance between our respective strengths despite our age difference, allowed me to maintain my hold. My heart pounded fiercely in my chest, and my breaths were rapid and shallow as I wrestled to keep her subdued.

Finally, she ceased moving, and I continued to hold the pressure on her artery for an extra ten seconds or so, just to ensure she remained unconscious for a little longer. I knew it wouldn't kill her, but I hoped it would keep her out for a few crucial moments more, as time was of the essence.

Quickly, I tore strips from her clothing to bind her hands and feet securely, which proved rather easy, as she was wearing a stylistically ripped shirt and pants. Then, pulling her shirt over her head, I obscured her vision, a precaution in case she regained consciousness sooner than anticipated.

With no time to waste, I turned my attention to the cache.

My fingers worked swiftly, entering the code I had memorised from Mr. Stirling's data package. The task didn't require much focus, but my mind was still racing from the encounter, making it a challenge to concentrate and punch in the code properly.

Moments later, a soft hiss signalled the cache's opening, breaking the tense silence.

I wasted no time, swiftly grabbing the shard and securing it in an inner pocket of my bomber jacket. Then, I spun on my heel, dashing towards the alley's entrance from which I had arrived, pushing my body to its limits.

At this point, stealth was off the table.

The netrunner would regain consciousness any second now; blood chokes were effective, but their impact was fleeting, lasting only about 20-30 seconds at best. Once she came to, I had no doubt she would sound the alarm, sending her crew after me in a frenzy.

Sneaking out, therefore, was not a luxury I could afford.

The temptation to pilfer her deck or any other valuables had also briefly crossed my mind.

However, time, as mentioned, was not on my side, and a thorough search was out of the question. Besides, her deck posed too great a risk. Being unfamiliar with netrunning, I had no way of knowing if the deck was rigged or linked to her in a manner that could alert her to my location if I took it. The potential danger outweighed the potential reward, and so, with a burst of speed fueled by urgency, I chose the safest option: To make a swift escape.

As I dashed towards the alley's entrance, my escape almost within reach, a sudden, desperate cry echoed from the opposite end, halting me in my tracks.

"Stop! Let me go...!" The voice, so utterly laced with fear and panic, invariably called up memories to the cries of the girl I hadn't managed to save just days before...