

## **Chapter 24 - The List**

Back on the 43rd floor, I had recovered just enough of my mental faculties to remember to inform Mr. Shori of the mission's success.

I sent him a quick message via my cerebral interface reading, [Mr. Shori, delivery completed successfully. If anyone asks about me, I'm Ela. Please use that name for me from today onwards.]

I figured that covering my bases like that would be prudent. Vega was undoubtedly going to talk to Mr. Shori about me showing up at the Downpour, so before the ganger had a chance to get him to sing, I had to level the playing field.

Minutes later, I finally heard the welcoming beep of the biometric lock disengaging at the door to my home.

I practically stumbled into the apartment, my legs barely able to keep me upright from the vast amount of workout they had gotten today.

*'Next time, I'll take a bit of a rest before going on a mission like that... Not smart to do a full workout at the start of the day and then also commit to such a ludicrous request,'* I thought, trying to distract myself from the immense exhaustion I felt.

I beelined it for Gabriel and my room, making sure to get inside quietly and pass by the still sleeping Gabriel before throwing off my clothes, putting on my basic PJs and hopping into my own bed.

I immediately punched in a full 8 hours of rest into the Rest Function and confirmed.

—

My eyes fluttered open with their usual abruptness, my earlier exhaustion having given way to the typical feeling of complete and utter confusion that came with the instant-sleep of the Rest Function.

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

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

*'Haaa, I really needed that,'* I sighed internally, feeling like I had downright been reborn with the way my entire body felt pristine once again. It was such a stark difference to my earlier state of pure and utter exhaustion, that I couldn't help but savour the feeling of just laying in my bed for a few extra minutes.

As I was already lazing around the bed, I figured that checking through the stored up System Notifications was a good idea, there was bound to be quite a few. *'And I still have the Task Rewards to claim too!'*

Pulling up the notifications, I got immediately inundated by a slew of them.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.  
[System]: 400xp gained for Edge Attribute.  
[System]: 300xp gained for Body Attribute.  
[System]: 500xp gained for Ego Attribute.  
[System]: 200xp gained for Intuition Attribute.  
[System]: 500xp gained for Ego Attribute.  
[System]: 100xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. (First time taste bonus.)

'Whoa, that's a massive amount of Attribute experience right there,' I thought as I took a tally of today's gains. This was, far and away, the most Attribute experience I had ever gotten.

The entire sequence had taken a massive toll on me, of course, but seeing the deluge of experience made it all seem very worth it. Not to mention, at the end of the day, I had managed to successfully complete Mr. Shori's request.

I opened the [Task] screen next.

[Task Completed: **Mr. Shori's Request**]  
[Reward: 250 Character Experience + 1 Skill Point]  
[Time Left before automatic reward collection: 03:12:54]

I made a mental note as the [Task] screen reminded me of some important aspects of Neon Dragon's mechanics, '*Right, I forgot about the 12-hour timer to claim quest rewards... Not too much of a deal, as it's fairly generous, but still. Something I should keep in mind for the future.*'

With a mental flick of a lever, I claimed the rewards.

[System]: 250xp gained.  
[System]: 1 Skill Point gained. Skill interface will automatically open to distribute excess points.

It seemed that there was no deferring this type of reward, as the [Skill] interface was opened automatically, with no apparent way to close it again until I had distributed the Skill Point.

[Skills - 1 Unspent Skill Point(s) available]

[Meditation] Level 3 - 3,000 / 3,000xp (Intuition/Ego)  
[First-Aid] Level 0 - 400 / 700xp (Intellect/Reflex)  
[Juggling] Level 3 - 400 / 3,000xp (Reflex)  
[Blades] Level 1 - 0 / 1,000xp (Body/Reflex)  
[Throwing] Level 3 - 0 / 3,000xp (Reflex)  
[Knives] Level 3 - 200 / 3,000xp (Reflex)  
[Programming] Level 1 - 100 / 1,000xp (Intellect)  
[Netrunning] Level 0 - 400 / 700xp (Intellect)  
[Manifestation] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (Intellect/Intuition)  
[Cooking] Level 1 - 900 / 1,000xp (Intuition/Tech)  
[Slicing] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (Intellect/Reflex)  
[Maid] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (Body/Intuition)

[Stealth] Level 1 - 600 / 1,000xp (Edge)

[Athletics] Level 1 - 0 / 1,000xp (Body)

I found myself knee-deep in the classic gamer conundrum, strategizing the best way to level up.

*'If the game mechanics here are anything like in Neon Dragons, I can't throw points at maxed-out Skills like [Meditation]... And a Skill Point should net me experience equal to one full level up for its current level, so I gotta aim high to get the most bang for my buck,'* I ruminated.

My current Skill roster boasted a few candidates ripe for the point—[Stealth], [Athletics], and [Programming] were all itching for a boost. Each was a solid pick, beckoning with the promise of heightened abilities that I really wanted to get my hands on as soon as possible, yet they all lingered at a meagre Level 1.

I inwardly kicked myself. *'If only I had a Level 2 Skill ripe for the upgrade,'* I groused. The idea of forgoing the thrill of a direct level-up from a Level 2 Skill gnawed at me. It felt like picking the slow lane by default.

But tossing a precious Skill Point into a Level 1 Skill? That was practically a cardinal sin.

That'd be like trading a gourmet burger for a fast-food slider when you're starving. Even if my Level 3 Skills couldn't climb higher due to the game's intricate balance of governing Attributes and Skills, the XP windfall would be the same.

After a moment of deliberation, it hit me. *'No point in not boosting the top dogs, right? Unless... a bump to Level 2 in [Stealth], [Athletics], or [Programming] would give me an edge right now.'*

A quick scan of my current predicaments, however, told me that wasn't likely to be the case. Most of my current problems would not be solved by a single Level-Up in any of the aforementioned Skills.

This was the same rationale I'd mentally applied to those Neon Dragons content creators I'd watched, facepalming each time they had "wasted" a Skill Point on a lower-level Skill, missing out on a juicy jump in XP.

Especially now, when this was my real life and not just a game. Here, XP wasn't just a number—it was my time, my effort, and let's be real, my literal sweat and tears. Every point of experience had weight, worth its weight in gold—or in this case, time, sweat and potential near-death experiences.

So, the decision boiled down to a choice between [Throwing] and [Knives].

They were the only Level 3 contenders in the lineup that wouldn't toss a whole heap of XP out the window while promising a neat boost once my Reflex hit the big four—which, by all accounts, was on the imminent horizon.

Given that [Knives] was already getting a daily workout courtesy of Mr. Shori's tutelage, it seemed prudent to let it level up the old-fashioned way. That left [Throwing] standing alone in the spotlight, ticking all the right boxes.

It sat pretty at Level 3, with a clean slate of 0 / 3000xp, ripe for the full 3,000-point windfall. It didn't hurt that it was handy in a pinch—the only real ranged option in my current arsenal—and the prospect of a fresh knowledge download was just icing on the cake.

With a decisive mental click, I allocated the Skill Point to [Throwing] and locked it in.

*'Here's to hoping I am not going to regret this choice later down the line...'*

[System]: 1 Skill Point(s) applied to [Throwing] Skill.

[System]: 3,000xp gained for [Throwing] Skill.

Done wrestling with the System's hoops and hurdles, I was itching to jump into another round of physical exercise. Nothing like a good workout to get the dopamine shots of experience dripping in, especially after getting a full recharge from the Rest Function.

But just as I was gearing up to peel myself off the bed, a shuffle across the room snagged my attention.

"Gabe?! You up?!" The words shot out before I could temper them, spiked with a sudden jolt of nerves.

His response was a groan that sounded like it carried the weight of the world. "Could you maybe not blast my eardrums?" came his muffled plea from across the room.

Instinct nearly had me bounding over to him, but I slammed the brakes on that impulse. I had a reveal up my sleeve for later—he didn't know I was back on my feet yet, after all.

So, playing it cool and sticking to the script, I plopped back into the trusty old wheelchair with its symphony of squeaks and rolled over to his side of the room. Time to play the caring sister, wheelchair edition.

I wheeled up beside Gabriel's bed, the old chair creaking in protest. "How you holding up, Gabe?" I asked, trying to keep the mood light despite the worry that was twisting my gut into knots.

His replies were clipped, each one punctuated by a grimace. The guy was clearly in more pain than he was letting on. "I've been better," he grunted, shifting uncomfortably under the covers.

I eyed him for a moment before asking, "Did you take the meds I laid out for you on the nightstand?" There was a small part of me that already knew the answer before he even opened his mouth.

With a sheepish tilt of his head, he admitted, "Didn't think to look for any..."

Classic Gabe, always forgetting the little things—even when they were important.

Rolling my eyes, I fetched a glass of water from the kitchen, and shoved it into his hands together with the bottle of pills and with the two inhalers that Dr. Malrick had prescribed. "Here, take these," I said, handing them over with a stern look that I hoped conveyed 'I'm not messing around'.

He took the medicine with a huff, clearly not thrilled about being babied.

"I'm not a kid, Sera. I can handle my meds," he protested after downing the pills and taking a puff from each inhaler.

That's when I felt a wave of unexpected anger wash over me. "Gabriel, you nearly *died*, remember?" I snapped, more sharply than I intended. "You think I'm just gonna sit back and watch after that stunt you pulled? Not happening. You're stuck with me for now, like it or not."

I softened a little at the end, hoping he understood this was coming from a place of concern, not control. He needed to be taken care of, and I wasn't about to let him forget it—not when he'd given me the scare of a lifetime and nearly left me alone in this crazy family.

Gabriel's head dipped, a shadow of contrition darkening his features. "Yeah... You're spot on, Sera. My bad," he murmured, the fight draining from him as quickly as it had surged. "Thanks for... well, for everything. If you hadn't been here, then—"

I cut in before he could trudge any further down guilt lane. "Hey, we're a team, remember? Sibling rule number one: No leaving the other behind, especially not for some minor scrape," I said, mustering a half-smile that I hoped conveyed 'don't worry about it'.

The corners of his mouth twitched, mirroring my own, as a soft expression replaced the pained one. Those painkillers must've been doing their magic, because the lines of agony had already smoothed from his brow.

"But seriously, spill it. You came home looking like you'd picked a fight with a vibroblade. Out with it, Gabe. What the fuck happened to you?" My tone was light, but the undercurrent of concern was as clear as daylight.

Gabriel sucked in a shaky breath, clearly wrestling with the memory. His eyes met mine, found the unwavering demand for the truth there, and caved.

"I was on my way back from work," he began, his voice a little stronger now. "Saw this woman lying on the sidewalk. Looked hurt. I know, I know—I should've walked on by. But she looked so... helpless."

He paused, the regret in his voice palpable. "Turns out, she was beyond help already. Dead. And that's when I realised I'd walked straight into a scav trap." His hand subconsciously drifted to his stomach, a phantom echo of the pain he'd endured.

"Three of them popped out from behind some junk, like the cockroaches they are—probably thought they'd hit the jackpot with me," he continued, a bitter twist to his words. "They wanted everything—creds, gear, you name it. But I wasn't about to roll over for some low-tier scavs."

I could almost picture it—the moment of decision, the primal instinct to flee. "I bolted. Only one of them was quick enough to take a swipe at me, and man, did he make it count," Gabriel recounted, his voice tinged with both adrenaline and disbelief.

He'd made it to safety, bleeding and battered but alive, fueled by sheer will and the kind of luck that made you believe in guardian angels—or at least, in really lazy scavs.

Gabriel definitely had that on me as well: He was a downright athlete, when compared to the vast majority of people I had met so far in this world. And scavs generally having to scrounge up trash to make it through the day? They didn't stand a chance trying to catch up to him, unless they were part of the larger groups.

As he finished his tale, I couldn't help the mix of relief and frustration that bubbled inside me. Relief that he was here, frustration that he'd been so foolish, and a silent promise that I'd teach him a thing or two about street smarts.

But one emotion was at the forefront of my thoughts: Unbridled anger.

The fury that coursed through me was almost tangible, a red-hot surge that pulsed with every beat of my heart. The gall of those scavs, to lay a finger on Gabriel—my darling brother—one of the only pure souls in this twisted world, was downright unfathomable.

They had marked themselves, etching their fate with the blade they had turned on him.

As I simmered in silent fury, a part of me acknowledged the reality: Direct retribution wasn't on today's menu. But oh, had they earned a spot on a very special list I had just decided to start compiling.

Before this, the thought of dishing out violence was nothing short of terrifying. Now, however? It was all I could do not to march out and exact justice.

But it wasn't fear that stayed my hand—it was logic. I was not ready for such a thing, just yet.

*'I swear on everything, they'll regret crossing a hair on Gabriel's head,'* I vowed, the resolve hardening like steel within me.

But vengeance is a dish best served perfectly planned.

I needed to beef up my Skills, buff out my Attributes, and concoct a master plan. And, of course, I had to uncover exactly *who* those three scavs were. Only *then* could I cross their names off my list, once and for all.

But patience was key; I had to wait until the time was right to strike back.

And when that time came, they'd never see me coming.

Gabriel's voice, laced with a brother's worry, cut through my inner turmoil like a beacon. "Sera, you've got this... look. Everything cool?"

I forced my features into neutral, trying to scrub the vengeance from my expression. "Oh, it's nothing, just replaying that mess in my head. And Gabe, c'mon man, you can't be springing into Good Samaritan mode without a second thought! She didn't even call out to you, you absolute blank. Promise me you'll steer clear of any more 'heroics' like that, alright?" I chastised, hoping he'd take the lesson to heart.

To further underscore my point, I grabbed the combat knife holster he'd given me just days earlier—a token of protection that suddenly seemed more fitting in his hands than mine.

"Here, you take this," I insisted, thrusting the weapon toward him. "Until you get a grip on some basic street smarts, you need it more than I do. I'm getting the hang of things around here, and I'm not planning any grand tours beyond Delta's comparatively safe walls any time soon. Use it if you have to. I need to be able to focus on my own recovery, not on whether my complete blank of a brother's gone and gotten himself shanked by some alleyway trash!"

Gabriel pushed back, his pride kicking in, "Sera, I don't need—"

But I levelled him with a look that could've cut through steel, my Ego Attribute in full effect in assisting my self-set goal, by removing every other type of emotion but sheer force of will. It was the kind of glare that said 'end of discussion' without a single word uttered.

He let out a sigh, capitulating under my unwavering stare, and reluctantly took the knife. "Jeez, you're starting to remind me of Valeria sometimes," he grumbled, a reluctant respect in his voice.

I just smirked, thinking to myself that maybe resembling Valeria wasn't such a bad thing. After all, gaining her approval was still high on my to-do list.

We exchanged a few more words, the kind of sibling chatter that filled the room with a semblance of normalcy, before Gabriel trudged off for a shower. I could almost see the weight of the day washing off with every step he took.

Meanwhile, I set the stage for my next act.

Mr. Shori's food boxes from yesterday were laid out next to the dining table like a treasure trove of culinary delights. Everything was in place for the grand unveiling.

Timing was key.

I waited for Gabriel to settle onto the couch, the image of post-shower refreshment, before casually throwing out the bait. "Hungry? You must be starving after... everything. Got some food here for you."

It was a perfect setup. He'd been out cold for a ton of hours, and his body was surely screaming for fuel to patch itself up. As I watched him eye the food boxes, I knew I had him; he was about to discover that while he'd been battling scavs, I'd been waging my own war... and winning.

Just as he was about to get up, I hit him with a sisterly, "Don't worry, I'll get it," before simply getting up from my wheelchair next to him and sauntering over to the food boxes, grabbing two of them and moving back to the couch to sit down next to him.

Gabriel's eyes nearly popped out of his skull as I unfolded myself from the wheelchair with the nonchalance of a magician revealing her final trick. There I was, on two feet, striding across the room like it was the most natural thing in the world.

For a moment, he just stared, his mouth agape, the cogs in his brain visibly grinding to a halt. You could practically see the thought bubble above his head: *'Is this the meds talking, or is Sera actually walking?'*

As the realisation dawned, his astonishment morphed into pure amazement, his earlier fatigue forgotten. "Wait, are you—? How—? When did you—?" His questions tumbled over one another in a jumble of incredulity and joy.

Grinning from ear to ear, I returned to the couch, setting down the food boxes in the cramped space on the coffee table, right in front of the TV. "Surprise," I chimed, revelling in his shocked expression. "And guess what? I helped make most of this too."

His eyes flicked between me and the boxes, as if verifying that this wasn't some elaborate hallucination. The revelation seemed to hit him in waves, each one washing over him with renewed surprise.

"You made this? You're walking...? And cooking? What the fuck, Sera?!" He was grappling with the double dose of news, his usual composure lost in a sea of bewilderment.

With a nod, I couldn't help but feel a bit like a cat who'd managed to sneak a taste of cream. "Yep, while you were out gallivanting in the concrete jungle, I was here, making moves. How do you think we got to Dr. Maltrick's clinic? I wheeled you there myself," I said, painting the picture of my newfound independence.

I conveniently omitted the part about the chrome-armed Samaritan who'd lent a hand. That was a debt I had yet to settle, and I made a mental note to swap details next time our paths crossed.

As the reality sank in, Gabriel reclined, his expression morphing from shock to a dawning smile of pride and disbelief. "That's... just wow, Sera. But, the doctors... they said it'd be months. How's this even possible?" he marvelled, clearly trying to stitch his expectations back together.

I just shrugged, playing it off cool.

*'Sometimes, life throws you a curveball—or in my case, a System that defies all medical logic,'* I thought but didn't say. Out loud, I simply offered, "I've come a long way in just a couple of days. I have no idea how, but I won't complain. Let's dig in, and I'll fill you in on the details of what I've been up to, how about it?"

I marvelled, not for the first time, at the staggering level of tech at my fingertips in this new world—even a modest food stall could boast gadgets that kept takeout as fresh as if you

were dining in. It was a slice of everyday cyberpunk life, the kind of future shock that was rapidly becoming my new normal.

Advanced tech was as ubiquitous here as street vendors in a market, often more available than the basics like a steady meal or a roof over your head. It was a twisted priority list, but it was the heartbeat of the genre—one where a box that could keep food hot for days was just another pedestrian piece of the landscape, while two to three simple meals a day was unobtainable for a large portion of the population.

Handing the second box to Gabriel, who was still clearly caught between the remnants of his drug-induced haze and the tangible reality of his super-recovered sister, I launched into a retelling of the things I had done over the past two days.

"So, after you headed out yesterday, I went straight back to my workout regimen..."

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After our sibling-dinner, which had ended with Gabriel complimenting the food more than generously, even having asked for seconds—which I happily provided, leaving me with one box for Oliver later that evening—he went back to get some more rest.

His wound was still healing and he needed all the rest time for his recovery that he could get.

His work had been surprisingly amicable, allowing him to simply work-off the hours he was missing with a two-times multiplier in the upcoming weeks and months as unpaid overtime—meaning he would have to basically do double-shifts for at least three days already, each day adding another two days of double-shifts on top.

While that sounded absolutely horrendous to my ears, Gabriel had assured me that this was “*more* than generous”. He had only gotten that good of a deal because the owner of the joint he worked at really, really liked him, apparently.

Regardless, I had been left to my own devices and there was really only one thing that I knew I wanted to do right now: Grind more experience.

I was feeling as fresh as the same morning when I had woken up, thanks to the Rest Functions ludicrous recovery aspect, and I now had a very clear goal in mind: Get myself ready to make those low-life trash scavs pay for attempting to kill my brother.

For that, I need a straight-up laundry list of things, but the most obvious and easiest to start working on were simple: A higher Body Attribute, higher levels for my [Athletics] Skill, [Knives] and [Throwing] Skills, as well as a big upgrade to my [Stealth] Skill as well.

I was hoping to start work on all of these, except for the [Knives] and [Throwing] ones, which were currently locked from advancing past Level 3 due to my Reflex being stuck there as well.

Assuming I got a full day of work at Mr. Shori's in tomorrow, however, I should be able to get my Reflex up to 4 easily, which would automatically bump my [Throwing] up to Level 4 as well. The [Knives] experience that was bound to be a part of that was just the cherry on top.

Resolved to up my game, I hit the corridors of the 43rd floor for a run—this time with a twist. I was on a mission to meld stealth with speed, a concept that felt as alien as silence in a thunderstorm.

The concept of sneaky sprinting was a head-scratcher, but my body seemed to catch on without needing the memo—nin nin. Thanks to that nifty Level 1 [Stealth] knowledge drop, my limbs moved with a fluidity that was part shadow, part athlete.

Sure, it might've put a slight damper on the intensity of my workout, reducing the overall experience [Athletics] and Body would get over the same period of time, but if it meant racking up [Stealth] experience alongside them, I was all in.

Despite the new strategy, I stayed true to one rule—Bonus XP was reserved exclusively for boosting my Body Attribute. A stronger body meant longer runs, which translated to heaps more XP for both [Athletics] and [Stealth].

My physical endurance was the bottleneck here, not the clock, and I was determined to push that limit as far as it would go...