

## **Chapter 44 - Taking Position**

With [Programming] hitting level 3, the G.E.M.A. System flooded my consciousness with a deluge of advanced programming knowledge that felt akin to unlocking a new dimension within the cyberspace.

The complexity and depth of this new information were staggering, expanding my understanding and capabilities far beyond what I had previously thought possible.

First and foremost, the system introduced me to advanced algorithmic techniques.

Concepts like dynamic programming and greedy algorithms were no longer just theoretical ideas but practical tools I could wield. I learned to identify when a problem could be broken down into smaller, overlapping subproblems to be solved once and saved for future reference, dramatically increasing efficiency of any future algorithms I might've wanted to employ.

Next, it delved into the intricacies of concurrent and parallel programming.

Understanding how to manage multiple processes and threads simultaneously opened up new avenues for optimising performance, especially in environments where time was of the essence. The nuances of synchronisation, deadlock avoidance, and race conditions were laid bare, equipping me with the knowledge to write robust, high-performance code that could leverage the full power of multi-core processors.

The realm of software design patterns was also similarly unravelled.

I was introduced to architectural patterns like MVC (Model-View-Controller) and concepts like Factory, Singleton, and Observer patterns. These weren't just patterns; they were blueprints that, when applied correctly, could solve more common software design problems efficiently and elegantly, making the codebase more scalable, reusable, and maintainable—something that would undoubtedly come in handy with my ever-increasing knowledge thanks to the System's generous Skill knowledge downloads.

Furthermore, it expanded my understanding of advanced database management, including normalisation techniques, advanced querying, and dealing with multiple different types of non-standard databases. It covered how to optimise database access, manage transactions, and ensure data integrity in complex systems.

This knowledge was going to prove absolutely vital for handling the vast amounts of data that the applications and systems in Neon Dragons would undoubtedly require.

Lastly, the level up brought an in-depth exploration of advanced cybersecurity techniques as well.

Beyond basic principles, I was now versed in encryption algorithms, secure socket layer communications, and penetration testing methodologies. Understanding the strategies for defending against database injections, cross-site scripting, and other similar cyber attacks was crucial, not just for protecting my own code but for identifying vulnerabilities in others'.

While none of the things went into too much depth, as was to be expected of a “mere” level 3 knowledge download, the sheer vastness of it was still staggering to behold.

The realisation of just how vast the realm of [Programming] was hit me like a freight train.

I found myself teetering on the edge of an immense iceberg of knowledge, peering into the crystal-clear depths below, where the vast uncharted territories of advanced programming lay hidden.

Before this knowledge download, many of these concepts were entirely foreign to me, to the point I hadn't even known most of them were a thing in the first place.

Now, not only was I aware of their existence and their fundamental applications, but I was also acutely conscious of the breadth and depth of understanding I *still* lacked. It was a humbling realisation, one that sparked a voracious appetite within me.

The duality of this revelation was both inspiring and daunting.

I found myself marvelling at the thought of acquiring such complex knowledge without the aid of the G.E.M.A. System. The discipline of [Programming] encompassed an incredibly broad spectrum of topics, each interlinking with the next in a complex web of knowledge.

*"How do people learn [Programming] without a direct knowledge download? How do they navigate through this insane sea of information without something like the G.E.M.A. System to help them out...?"* These questions swirled in my mind, as I tried to regain some semblance of coherent thought to continue following Kill Joy's lesson.

However, it wasn't long before I realised I was in dire need of a break, so with a profound exhale, I disconnected the SPG-01 shard and came back to reality.

My mind was pulsating, overwhelmed not just by the deluge of knowledge from the System but also by the effort to grasp and understand the myriad complexities of this new world. The G.E.M.A. System might have been my cheat-like gateway to instant knowledge and Skills, but the journey to truly comprehend this world's nuances, be it inter-social or mechanically, was mine to undertake on my own.

Take the difference between the two disciplines of [Quick-Hacks], for instance.

This was something I needed to wrap my head around *beyond* what the System could simply download into my brain as part of the Skill knowledge downloads. Understanding when and how to apply each discipline was crucial.

I had to grasp the advantages, limitations, and specific uses of each to make informed decisions about future purchases as well—whether it was decks, implants, or Crowns. Investing in the wrong tech could mean squandering resources on something that wouldn't deliver the most bang for my, very limited, bucks.

So, despite the immense boost the System gave me, there was still a significant portion of learning that required my active engagement and critical thinking.

And right now, my brain felt like it was mired in molasses, utterly unsuited for the kind of sharp, focused contemplation necessary for that level of self-directed learning.

Checking over the stored up Notifications, I did feel slightly better, however. Seeing numbers go brrr was always very satisfying and helped ease my headaches, even in my past life—a good ol’ session of two to three hours of Wood Cutting grinding had never failed to make me feel better, after all.

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

[System]: *[Programming] Skill has reached Level 3.*

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

[System]: *[Quick-Hacks] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *300xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.*

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

The gains from my efforts today might not have been monumental in terms of numbers, but their impact was undeniably significant.

I was on the cusp of reaching rank 3 in Intellect and level 2 in [Netrunning], and I had also taken my first solid steps into the realm of [Quick-Hacks]. Although the journey to becoming a skilled netrunner loomed large ahead, I could finally see tangible progress toward that lofty goal—and, by extension, toward squaring my substantial debt with Gabe, a task that remained a priority on my ever-growing list of things to do.

Yet, as the day wound down, I found myself succumbing to a familiar exhaustion, the kind that follows a day filled with relentless challenges. Seeking a semblance of relaxation, I resorted to [Juggling] with my ever-reliable sockballs. I wasn’t aiming for anything in particular, but I was feeling similar to how I had always felt when I started a new grind-heavy video game in my past life: Not doing anything was a waste of time.

Even if I wanted to relax, to shut down a bit and just chill for a while, I definitely knew that I wouldn’t be able to, if I wasn’t doing something on the side that made the numbers go brrr.

The evening had slipped by quicker than usual, thanks in part to the extended hours at Mr. Shori’s, when suddenly, a message flashed into my vision, jolting me from my relaxation with its unexpected arrival.

“Ah, fuck! Jesus christ, was that necessary?!” I let out involuntarily at the startlingly abrupt return to reality.

I steadied my racing heart before opening it, recognizing the now-familiar (Insufficient Access) tag that my cerebral interface had conveniently translated to “Mr. Stirling”.

[Next data-collection, tomorrow. (Information attached).]

His message, ever succinct, snapped me out of my brief respite and catapulted me back into the high-stakes world of corporate espionage and debt repayment. There was no more time for relaxation; duty called, and with it, the relentless march toward settling my obligations.

Diving into the info packet, a few things immediately grabbed my attention.

For starters, the gig for tomorrow wasn't on any restricted floors.

Instead, I was heading down to the 33rd floor. Also owned by Falkum Industries, this level wasn't just for living; it was also a hub for shopping and marketplaces.

I had a hunch this place might feel a lot like the 31st floor, which was Rockefeller Inc's turf. That's the same floor where I had checked out Misha's Emporium and Circuit Locks just a few days back, so I had a rough idea of what to expect.

Pulling up the always in-depth maps and notes from Mr. Stirling's data package, I went over the same planning as I had done for the last data collection, namely: Searching for escape routes, should shit go wrong. I earmarked the nearest elevators, restricted elevators, shops and hiding places, just in case.

Finally, I read through the exact rundown provided as well, to figure out what exactly it was that I was there to retrieve.

"So, I'll have to get a data-shard from this location... Not interacting with any people tomorrow, that should be a lot less complicated then. Just go in there, pick up the shard, hand it off to Mr. Stirling and we're golden. No biggy," I muttered to myself, while doing my best to ignore the myriad of flags I was raising for things to go horribly, horribly wrong.

After triple-checking the mission details to make sure I didn't miss any crucial info, escape paths, or mission specifics, I put together a quick summary for Valeria and shot it her way.

*'Better keep the boss lady in the loop, or it's my head on the line,'* I thought, the idea amusing and terrifying me in equal measure.

My situation with Valeria was, to put it mildly, *complicated*.

She was essentially my landlord, providing the roof over my head, and a vital link to some potentially game-changing contacts and opportunities. At the same time, however, I could not help but see her as a substantial threat to both my physical and mental health, considering the recent brush with NeuroCorpse.

I couldn't fault original Sera for leaving home often, if that entire incident was more of a common occurrence, but based on Gabe's reaction and the brief talk we had shared about the incident, it was a one-off thing that has never happened before.

So, here I was, torn on what to think about my "mother."

Was Valeria an ally to keep close, or a danger to steer clear from?

For now, the scales in my mind tipped in favour of her being more useful than harmful—especially after that sizable restricted credits shard she had handed me—, assuming Gabe's take was on the mark.

Furthermore, by playing along with Valeria's demands, I was also banking on earning some leeway, a sort of safety net against any future slip-ups to keep me safe.

That was the plan, at least.

Was I making tons of enabler-like excuses simply because I also just *really* wanted a family to come home to, as strange, toxic and utterly dysfunctional as some of their members appeared to be?

Maybe, potentially, absolutely yes. I wouldn't ever admit to it openly, however.

Growing up, my childhood was a series of moves from one foster home to another, each one leaving its own mark, rarely for the better.

My concept of family was pieced together from fleeting glimpses into my friends' lives during sleepovers, offering me a window into what might have been. Neglect, abuse and... worse had shaped my early years, convincing me that maybe closeness wasn't for me.

But that belief was challenged the moment I found myself living Sera's life and met Oliver on that very first day. It had dawned on me that I had been absolutely *craving* connection, longing for someone to genuinely care.

So, facing the complexities of this new family, especially after the unsettling incident with Valeria, was I ready to walk away, considering it might have been a solitary lapse as Gabriel suggested?

I knew I wouldn't. That I *couldn't*.

This felt like my shot at something I'd longed for—a real family. Despite the initial hiccup with Valeria, which was seriously messed up, abandoning this chance wasn't an option for me.

Not yet.

And then there was Aki, her situation possibly echoing or even surpassing the difficulties I faced with Valeria. It made me wonder if what I was experiencing was just the norm here.

With limited insight into the typical family dynamics of this world—I mean, gameplay videos hardly cover the domestic life of your average citizen—I was navigating blindly.

But I was determined to make the most of this opportunity, to give this family thing all I had.

After all, who's to say Valeria wasn't just being a typical mom in this world's standards?

Without more context, it's hard to judge. But I was willing to find out, to learn and adapt, and, if push came to shove, make a difficult choice.

But I was only going to make that choice when I was fully ready.

Ready to accept the consequences; to throw away what little I had been granted by the cosmic mulligan of Sera's life; to live in this world without a safety net.

Valeria, despite everything, was providing something irreplaceable—a secure home.

In a world like Neon Dragons, having access to a restricted floor, that was fully secure from any scavs, gangers or otherwise, was an absolute game changer for what you could do.

Just taking my time in this world as a prime example: If Valeria hadn't been Sera's mother and I wasn't living on this floor, I would not have ever considered leaving the apartment before I reached at least 3 or higher in Body.

Walking out on that first day, the moment I had reached a walkable stage was only something I had done, because I *knew* that I'd be safe on this floor. That the moment I returned here, I was out of reach for just about anyone that might put their eyes on me this early on.

This level of safety was absolutely invaluable and nothing I could even come close to, if I tried to head out on my own right now. It was something I always had to keep in mind during my dealings with Valeria at all times, no matter how much her actions irked or downright infuriated me.

And deep down, the part that really wanted to forgive and forget, simply live the life of a normal girl with a proper family, was similarly hoping that maybe, *just maybe*, Valeria might have had a good reason for the things she had done outside of a vain sense of hurt pride.

But all those considerations were something for another time; a time where I was more prepared and actually had the capability to *make* a choice.

For now, I sent off the information to Valeria, in accordance with her wishes, to earn me a buffer, should I accidentally slip up again in the future.

Right after, I checked the [Task] interface, to see whether my thoughts from before about the individual Data-Collection tasks were correct. Much to my delight, it seemed that they had been.

[Task Accepted: *Mr. Stirling's Request (Second Data Collection)*]

[Description: *Collect and deliver the data to Mr. Stirling from floor 33 of the Delta Mega Building. 0/1 Data Collected. Time Limit: 29:01:33.*]

[Reward: *100 Character Experience + 1 General Skill Point*]

'Another free, General Skill Point! This debt repayment is absolutely amazing,' I thought to myself, giggling excitedly to myself.

I had initially been annoyed at the fact that Valeria had pawned off the debt to me, even though it was technically correct that I had incurred it, but by now, I was more than happy to take part in this.

Sure, the whole corporate espionage aspect was extremely dangerous, but when I was essentially promised 2-4 General Skill Points, a General Perk Point, as well as enough experience to get my General Level to 1? I really couldn't complain about improper rewards.

The System was more than generous in my eyes, considering how thoroughly amazing the rewards were for the risks involved—as long as everything went smoothly, of course.

With those thoughts in mind and a thoroughly exhausted brain, ready to punch out, I decided to finally take that shower I had deferred after coming home in favour of the SPG-01 shard's digital world.

Now that I had finished all my tasks for the day, however, I could finally indulge myself in some idle vanity...

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After my usual morning workout the following day, by the time I returned to the apartment, I was eagerly anticipating a refreshing shower once again.

The session had been particularly intense; I had experimented with various methods to ramp up the difficulty of my routine, all in an effort to maximise the experience gains per hour that had recently started diminishing rather drastically with my increased Skill levels.

Once back, I sifted through the Notifications accumulated over the morning, curious to see if my efforts had paid off in boosting my experience yield.

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

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

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

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

[System]: *800xp (+400xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 300xp.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for [Stealth] Skill. Available Bonus left: 0xp.*

[System]: *400xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.*

[System]: *[Acrobatics] Skill has reached Level 2.*

Reviewing my morning workout's experience gains left me with mixed feelings.

While the Body, Edge, and [Acrobatics] Skills had seen a noticeable improvement thanks to my revised routine, the outcome didn't fully satisfy me.

Despite pushing myself significantly harder, resulting in about 50-60% more effort, the returns—a mere 15-20% increase in gains—hardly seemed worth the additional exhaustion.

It was immediately clear that sustaining this level of exertion wasn't practical for the long haul.

The prospect of needing to employ the Rest Function mid-day crossed my mind, but this would mean forgoing valuable hours that could be spent enhancing my skills. This balance of effort versus reward would require further tweaking; my current approach was neither sustainable nor efficient.

However, the gains from today were definitely welcome, especially that bump in the [Acrobatics] Skill.

Upon reaching level 2 in [Acrobatics], the System's knowledge download and muscle memory enhancements had shifted from the basic fall prevention techniques to more refined acrobatic manoeuvres.

This had included the principles of rolling to dissipate impact energy efficiently, basic tumbling techniques for increased agility, and the fundamentals of balance maintenance on varying surfaces.

Additionally, I was introduced to the concept of dynamic jumping—understanding how to calculate and execute jumps for distance and height with vastly increased precision.

The enhancements also covered the beginnings of aerial awareness, teaching me how to orient my body during flips or jumps to land safely.

This new layer of acrobatic knowledge not only aimed to improve physical performance but also to minimise the risk of injury during more complex movements, laying a foundational skill set that could be built upon with further practice and experience—or levels.

It had been a fairly small knowledge download, in the grand scheme of things, but I could tell that the knowledge wasn't necessarily the point for this one in particular.

It was the muscle memory that came alongside the knowledge, which was far and away more important in every way.

I had gotten the level up around halfway through my usual jog, but the instant it hit, I could absolutely feel the difference in my stride instantly.

I was using less energy to do the cartwheels that I used to train my [Acrobatics] mid-run, they were more fluid in every way and even my basic walking, running and sprinting had gotten a tangible, but impossible to describe upgrade.

My best attempt to do so would be to say that it was like I was simply conserving the energy of movement slightly more efficiently than before, through subtle changes in the way my muscles responded to every impact.

It honestly felt amazing.

But with all that out of the way for the day, I had only really one more thing to cross of my usual routine for today, before I delved back into the world of corporate espionage: My usual shift at Mr. Shori's...

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PoV: Jade

Jade felt excited for the first time since that damned assignment had been given to her.

Yesterday had been a massive breakthrough in observing and gathering intel on the enigmatic “Ela,” as she had finally gotten a first-hand look at some of the girl’s real capabilities.

She wasn’t entirely sure if it was because she had passed some form of test, that she was unable to properly detect, or whether she had simply been deemed a non-threat by Ela, but Jade didn’t really care either way: She finally had something tangible on the girl.

Both the strange cutting technique that seemed to simply allow her knife to move through infamously cut-resistant ingredients, as well as her spectre-like movement that left no traces, were things that would undoubtedly interest Vega.

Today was promising to shape up in a similar fashion, as Ela had arrived at Mr. Shori’s just shortly after Jade—she may have been a bit too over-eager to continue her investigation after yesterday’s success and had arrived way too early—and been all smiles about seeing “Aki” again.

While Jade was still thoroughly confused about Ela’s motives, operations or really, anything about the girl, one thing seemed certain by now: She really liked the character of “Aki” that Jade was putting on for her.

It was clear to her that Ela knew it was all an act, based on her continued allusions towards Jade’s real person, but who was she to judge how somebody enjoyed their interpersonal relationships? If Ela was willing to engage with “Aki” and show her glimpses of her true capabilities as a reward, she would play “Aki” as long as she had to...

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Their shift at Shori’s Noodles was coming to a close by now, the two of them having shared very few words outside of Ela’s usual tricks, proddings and infuriatingly enigmatic comments, but Jade had gladly played along.

There was nothing new that she had picked up from today, except for the fact that she had paid even closer attention to the girl’s movements than usual, which had revealed one peculiar aspect of her capabilities: She was not leaving any footsteps, anywhere.

*‘I don’t know whether this has always been the case, or she simply stopped holding back after yesterday’s breakthrough,’* Jade thought to herself, kicking herself mentally for not paying more attention to this kind of stuff before. She couldn’t remember whether Ela had ever left footsteps, or not.

It seemed like such a stupid question; such a *simple* thing to observe, yet she hadn’t even thought about somebody her age having access to such high-tier cybernetics or bionics, so the idea of checking for somebody’s footprints, who wasn’t trying to hide at all, seemed utterly ludicrous in the first place.

Well, this wasn’t quite true.

It wasn’t as much the access, but the capacity to handle such high-tier parts, specifically.

When it came to cybernetics, especially, getting something like a T3 (Feather Step), which was the lowest-Tier cybernetic part that Jade knew could produce similar results to what Ela was showing, the toll on the body, and mind especially, was tremendous.

*'It has to be bionics. There's no shot she would survive a T3 cybernetic in both legs at this age, no matter how insane she is as an Op,'* Jade mused while intently staring at Ela's calves. *'But that would mean her means are far beyond anything that I, or even Vega, anticipated, too. T3 bionics like that would cost an absolute fortune for somebody her age...'*

Bionics were, after all, a lot easier on the body and mind than cybernetics were.

They were, when pitted directly against each other, vastly worse in price to performance, but their limited impact on the body's functions and the reduced risk of any Mindshatter incidents was often worth the increased cost for those that had the means, at least when it came to young scions, like Ela might be.

Nevertheless, she did not have enough information about the exact art of the girl's enhancements, so she didn't want to jump to conclusions quite yet. Assumptions were incredibly dangerous, after all, as they tainted one's entire point of view towards a certain observation, rather than objectively coming to a conclusion based on facts.

It was something that Vega had taught her since early on, and she tried to live to the fullest every day. It was one of those profound teachings that really paid dividends decades down the line, after one had fully ingrained it into their being—something that Jade felt she was getting close to with this one in particular...

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One somewhat surprising thing did happen during today's observation, however: Ela excused herself from Shori's Noodles earlier than yesterday.

Jade wasn't entirely sure if that was her usual shift or what, but her senses told her that this was a perfect opportunity, she couldn't afford to miss.

Waiting for the girl to have left, she also excused herself with Mr. Shori's blessings, before quickly shadowing Ela, as best she could. Surprisingly enough, it didn't seem like Ela cared much, as Jade had no trouble following her.

*'Does she want to show me something...? She must be, right? Why else would she just openly announce she's going early and then not employ any of her stealthing capabilities to shake me off?'* Jade thought to herself as she ducked into a nearby alley, to avoid any potential run-ins with Ela directly.

Her suspicions were confirmed, when the girl abruptly veered off of her usual path. Instead of going for the restricted elevators like she usually did, she joined the rest of the throng of people in joining the bog-standard elevator instead.

Quickly zooming in with her Ondul Mk.3 optical implants, she saw how Ela openly punched in her intent to go to the 33rd floor into the console.

*'You're trying to show me something on the 33rd floor...? What's on the 33rd floor Ela?'*

With quick steps, Jade rushed towards the nearest elevator and similarly punched in her intent to go to the 33rd floor.

This was her chance to get even more intel on Ela, and one she would absolutely not miss for anything...