

Chapter 39 - First Data Collection

The girl's eyes remained fixated on me, almost as if she was just waiting for me to pounce on her.

Her wariness was palpable, casting a shadow over my sincere attempt to extend a helping hand. This level of distrust, though disheartening, wasn't entirely unexpected whatsoever. I recalled my own guarded reaction when I first encountered Mr. Shori's kindness.

My acceptance of his offer had been decidedly swifter, but I also hadn't spent my entire life in this harsh world, dealing with gods know what kind of trouble from a young age.

Determined to maintain a gentle demeanour, I patiently held out the bowl of ramen to her. My approach was cautious and non-threatening, much like one would use to coax a wary, stray cat. I almost instinctively squinted my eyes—a calming gesture I learned in my past life to gain a cat's trust—but quickly stopped myself, realising it would seem decidedly odd in this context.

Gradually, I noticed a shift in her expression.

The raw, unadulterated terror in her eyes began to fade, replaced by a heavy dose of suspicion. *'This is progress... I think,'* I thought, relieved to see her slowly letting her guard down. *'I just hope she decides soon, or the ramen will turn cold.'*

As the girl's demeanour gradually shifted, her defensive stance eased into a more relaxed posture. She transitioned from appearing ready to vanish into the throng to standing slightly more confidently.

Speaking for the first time, her voice carried an unexpected strength and a hint of scepticism.

"Why...? Why are you doing this?" she inquired, her gaze flitting between my eyes, as though she was searching for any hint of deceit in each one individually.

Internally, I grappled with a sense of annoyance. *'I'm really not cut out for this kind of interaction, Mr. Shori. I'm not good with people,'* I thought, despite maintaining a friendly exterior.

"Like I said, Mr. Shori wanted me to help you. He noticed you in the crowd and thought you might be hungry. He did the same for me when I needed it," I reiterated, explaining Mr. Shori's compassionate gesture and the reason I was here now.

Her response was unexpected, a blend of annoyance and resignation. "You know that's not—*Whatever*," she began, but abruptly stopped herself, her tone shifting. "Fine, I'll play along with this game of yours."

Accepting the bowl from my hands, she did so with a level of agility and strength that belied her apparent state of fatigue and hunger. Her actions weren't those of a typical destitute street dweller.

I found myself abruptly curious about her background. *'She seems more composed and capable than I initially thought. Could she be a runaway from a relatively well-off family or something like that?'* I wondered, intrigued by her poised yet irritable demeanour.

Her acceptance of the meal, albeit grudgingly, was a small victory in breaking through her defensive shell. Her story, whatever it might be, seemed layered and complex, far from the straightforward tale of hardship I had assumed at first glance.

I motioned towards the scattered seating near Shori's Noodles, inviting her to take a seat.

Without a word, the girl promptly headed towards the chairs, her behaviour having shifted dramatically from that of a frightened, vulnerable girl to one resembling a disgruntled, irritable teenager.

Her abrupt change in attitude left me puzzled. *'What exactly is her story?'* I wondered silently.

Taking a seat beside her near the stall's front, we both faced Mr. Shori.

For a fleeting moment, he glanced my way, giving a subtle nod of approval. A wave of satisfaction washed over me at this small gesture of acknowledgment from the man I'd come to regard as a grandfather-like figure in recent days. *'All the effort to remain calm and friendly so far was totally worth it!'* I thought, basking in the warm glow of his silent commendation.

Meanwhile, the girl beside me scrutinised the steaming bowl of ramen as if it were a mysterious artefact. With a surprising precision, she wielded a pair of chopsticks in one hand and a spoon in the other, gently probing and lifting the noodles and other ingredients, more in exploration than in the act of eating.

"Is there anything in there that's not to your liking?" I inquired with a warm, hopefully accommodating smile. "I'd be more than happy to whip up another batch, especially if there's an ingredient that doesn't agree with you or something." My offer was aiming to placate the discerning teenager in front of me to the best of my ability.

"Remake it...?" she murmured under her breath, a note of surprise in her tone. Lifting her gaze, she locked eyes with me, her expression a curious blend of incredulity and interest. "Did you actually *make* this yourself?"

In response, I gave her a simple, friendly nod.

The girl's eyes, previously narrowed in scrutiny, suddenly flicked back to the bowl with an unmistakable glint of fright. It was as if she'd seen a ghost hiding among the noodles and broth.

To ease her apparent alarm, I tried to inject a bit of humour into the situation. "It's not poisoned or anything, I promise. Eating a dinner laced with a bunch of NeuroCorpse once was more than enough for me; never again. So, I generally don't include poison in my recipes." I chuckled lightly, hoping to lighten the mood.

To my dismay, my attempt at a joke seemed to have the opposite effect.

The mention of my recent, harrowing dinner experience only intensified the terror in her eyes, transforming her cautious intrigue into unadulterated horror. Realising that my words had backfired spectacularly, I knew I needed to act quickly to salvage the situation.

In a swift motion, I reached for a clean spoon from a nearby tray.

Dipping it into the aromatic bowl in front of the girl, I scooped up a generous portion of the broth and noodles and brought it to my lips, taking a hearty mouthful.

Swallowing with an exaggerated expression of delight, I reassured her, "See? No poison. It's perfectly safe. Really." I flashed her an encouraging smile, hoping my actions spoke louder than my poorly chosen words.

Gradually, the girl's rigid posture began to ease once again, albeit slightly, after witnessing my sampling of the ramen. Yet, her body language remained tense, like a tightly coiled spring, betraying an underlying sense of extreme apprehension.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her words were hindered by a crack in her voice.

Pausing, she cleared her throat with a small, embarrassed cough before attempting again. "Alright. I'll eat it... Thank you," she said, her voice steadier this time but still carrying a hint of uncertainty.

I shook my head gently, my smile still in place. "Oh, you don't need to thank me," I replied, eager to shift the credit where it was due. "You should really be thanking Mr. Shori. Without his guidance, I wouldn't know the first thing about cooking. He's the one who supplied the ingredients and, more importantly, he's the one who knew you needed help."

Realising then that we hadn't formally introduced ourselves, I extended my hand in a friendly gesture. "Oh, and by the way, I'm Ela," I added with a warm, inviting smile. It seemed important to establish a more personal connection, especially considering the morning's unexpected turn of events so far.

As if my words had unwittingly sprung another one of her mental trap cards, Aki's eyes narrowed once more, sharpening like the edge of a finely honed blade as she scrutinised me anew. It was as though she was peering through a microscope, trying to uncover a hidden maze of motives and intentions behind my every gesture and phrase I uttered.

However, her search seemed fruitless.

With a resigned sigh that seemed to carry the weight of her suspicions, Aki took my hand.

Her handshake was surprisingly firm, betraying a strength that belied her cautious demeanour. "Name's Aki. I'll be sure to extend my gratitude to Mr. Shori, then," she said, her voice steadier now, yet still tinged with a trace of wariness.

Feeling a sense of accomplishment, as if I had successfully navigated a delicate diplomatic mission, I rose from my seat beside her.

"I'll head back to my post behind the stall then," I announced cheerfully. "If you find yourself needing anything at all, just mention it to Mr. Shori. He's the epitome of kindness, and I'm pretty sure he's physically incapable of saying no. It was really nice meeting you, Aki. I hope we cross paths again soon!"

With a swift turn, I made my way back to the familiar and comforting confines of the stall's back area. As I walked away, I couldn't help but notice the flicker of fear that still danced in Aki's eyes at my departure.

'She really needs to relax a bit... I'm not exactly intimidating, am I? Sure, my hair's absolutely amazing now, but that shouldn't be enough to spook someone like that!' I mused to myself, pondering over Aki's strangely apprehensive reactions as I returned to my spot at the broth pots in the back of the stall...

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Over the next few hours, I immersed myself in the usual hustle of the day, gently nudging the memory of my encounter with the peculiar girl to a quiet corner of my mind. After all, there were more pressing matters at hand that demanded my attention.

By the time my shift concluded and I made my way toward the restricted elevators, the image of the girl had faded like a morning mist. *'I should ask Mr. Shori about her tomorrow,'* I thought idly as I waited for the elevator. I was curious whether she ever spoke to him after our interaction whatsoever.

Once I returned home, I dove headfirst into transitioning into my Operator persona. Although it was still a considerable work-in-progress, the allure of being an Operator had always captivated me and was definitely something I was going to work towards in this life.

In the vibrant and shadowy world of Neon Dragons, Operators were akin to something like elite mercenaries.

They primarily worked with Fixers—those rare, savvy individuals who gathered the necessary intel on gigs and set up contracts for others to execute. But their skills were so in demand that virtually anyone with sufficient credits could enlist their services. Even bigger corporations ended up resorting to the work of Operators quite often.

Being an Operator was a role that teetered on the edge of danger and excitement, offering rewards as high as the risks involved. It was no surprise that in Neon Dragons, the path of the Operator was a coveted one for the player character.

The most intriguing and morally ambiguous jobs often required the expertise of a well-known Operator. After all, when delving into the realms of the legally questionable or outright perilous, it paid to have a seasoned and reputable professional by your side.

This world didn't take kindly to amateurs or unknowns, especially in the darker undertows of its sprawling neon-lit streets. My journey was only just beginning, so I had to make sure I had a good start to my potential new career.

Slipping into the comfortable undershirt and pants, I then donned the Pseudo-Tier 1 Bomber jacket and scarf, feeling the familiar weight of their heavier aramid fibres settle on my shoulders. Although I hoped not to rely on their protective capabilities, I knew that in the risky game of corporate espionage, being prepared was non-negotiable.

The stakes of each mission felt akin to navigating a high-risk video game: Every operation was on hardcore mode, where one misstep could mean the end, with no second chances.

I tightened the sheath of my knife, positioning it expertly between my jacket and undershirt, following Mr. Stirling's recent advice.

"Don't hide your knife under your clothes," he had cautioned with the authority of an experienced professional. "Anyone who knows their weapons will spot it in an instant. You're just hindering your access to it. Wear it at your hip, back, or thighs, but never under a layer that restricts a quick draw. That applies to guns too, should you ever get one."

His words had resonated with the logical part in me, and I had swiftly adopted his advice. Since I might potentially meet him again for the drop-off later, I was determined to impress him by showing that I had taken his guidance to heart immediately.

Before stepping out the door to head towards the 62nd floor, I carefully inserted the access shard Mr. Stirling had given me into my neck slot. This little piece of technology was crucial; without it, I wouldn't be able to get the elevator to take me to the designated floor.

As a final check, I meticulously reviewed all the task-related details, including maps and notes Mr. Stirling had digitally transferred during our conversation the previous day.

They were all spread out in front of me, hovering digitally over the coffee table while I lounged on the living room couch. This visual arrangement of my mission details, likely a habit from my past life, felt more comfortable to me than simply scrolling through them in my cerebral interface.

Fortunately, the solitude of my home spared me from any curious eyes that might find my behaviour and gestures odd.

"So... I need to head to room 62-043, have a chat with the person there, and they'll hand over the data," I vocalised, summarising the short mission briefing I had received from Mr. Stirling. "Sounds straightforward enough..."

Next, I focused on devising multiple escape strategies, just in case the situation spiralled out of control.

"The nearest standard and restricted elevators are located here... here, and here," I marked them on the map displayed in my cerebral interface, designating them as escape plans A, B, C, and D. I've always believed in the principle of being over-prepared rather than caught off guard. "If I sense anything amiss, I'll aim for a casual exit using one of these routes, choosing the one that seems least likely to lead into trouble. In the event of an active pursuit, options B or D would be more strategic. They're further away and the complex layout of the hallways should help me shake off any followers...I hope."

I was fairly confident that reaching one of the elevators would signify my safety.

These elevators were owned by the Mega Building owners and served the *entire* building, not just a specific floor, so it seemed improbable that the proprietors of the 62nd floor could halt them, unless they resorted to outright sabotage.

Once back on the 43rd floor, I was quite sure I could count on Mr. Stirling's protection. He had not-so-subtly alluded to this the previous day. While I wasn't one to blindly trust someone's word of protection, there was a genuine ring to his assurance about this aspect of his job's responsibilities—specifically the part where he was supposed to take care of any intruders.

In the unlikely event that all other options failed, I always had my apartment as a last resort. I could easily barricade myself inside and contact Valeria—it was a last-resort, but a powerful one. She was assuredly going to be able to message someone at Ether Labs who could handle any pursuers brave enough to follow me there.

Additionally, the apartment was equipped with an array of kitchen knives, perfect candidates for a quick application of my [Sharpen] Perk and [Blademaster's Throw] Ability. This combination was a formidable defence, sure to deter anyone foolish enough to attempt a break-in.

"Alright. Let's get this show on the road," I muttered to myself as I rose from the couch and walked towards the door of the apartment, trying to hype myself up and get rid of the anxious knot in my stomach.

Despite my best attempts at thinking through every eventuality, I was still about to set out and be complicit in bona-fide corporate espionage in a cyberpunk world. There was barely a faster way to get disappeared than that, if there was anything I knew about the genre as a whole.

Nobody could really fault me for being a tad nervous about this whole thing, right...?

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As the elevator smoothly glided upwards to the 62nd floor, the rhythmic thumping of my heart echoed in my ears, amplifying my anxious anticipation. To merely label myself as nervous at this point would be a colossal understatement.

There was a fleeting moment of regret for not having my knife more accessible; its familiar weight and grip would almost certainly have brought a sense of reassurance.

'Stay calm, Sera. You've got this. Just act like you're meant to be here. And if anyone dares to pry, just brush them off—it's none of their business,' I mentally rehearsed my strategy for navigating the floor. After all, there was no obligation to entertain the inquiries of the overly curious.

As long as they weren't Falkum Industries security, no one really held any jurisdiction over me there.

As I stepped out of the elevator, the transition from my familiar 43rd floor to the 62nd was striking. The 43rd floor, my new home, had always felt somewhat welcoming, lived-in and grounded, with its more down-to-earth lighting and dressed rock-crete walls.

In stark contrast, the 62nd floor exuded a sense of opulence and high-tech efficiency. The lighting here was cooler, casting sharp, angular shadows across sleek, metallic surfaces. It was like the entire floor had been clad in some kind of metallic-armour, for whatever reason, and large, black letters were prominently displayed across the hallways in regular intervals: F.I.

I followed the map displayed in my cerebral interface, trying to ignore the oppressive atmosphere of the floor I had found myself on. I had consciously decided to have the map actively displayed while I tried to navigate the floor.

It would not only ensure that I wouldn't lose my way in this unfamiliar environment but it would also serve a secondary, more subtle purpose: My standard-issue eyes, glowing with a soft, light-blue neon hue, signalled to everyone around me that I had something displayed in my cerebral interface. It was like a sign above my head that said I was engaged in something important.

It was a universally understood indicator in the world of Neon Dragons, akin to wearing earbuds in my old world. It was a silent request for others to keep their distance, and I hoped it would ward off any unwelcome interruptions or curious onlookers.

As I navigated the corridors, I really couldn't help but feel a sense of strange detachment, further emphasised by the stark, almost clinical ambiance. This place was a far cry from the more homely vibe of my own floor, where each corner seemed to tell a story.

Here, every element was like it was meticulously designed for efficiency and elegance, downright devoid of any personal touch. The very few people I passed by seemed to mirror this environment, moving with purposeful strides, their expressions focused and unreadable.

'At least their indifference works in my favour... Better to have them aloof and disinterested than overly inquisitive,' I mused quietly to myself as I navigated the corridors of the 62nd floor.

After a few minutes of diligently following the clearly marked waypoints on my cerebral interface, which I had meticulously set up in advance, I arrived at my destination: Apartment 62-043.

The journey here had been unexpectedly smooth and devoid of any complications.

Unlike my experience on floor 31, where guards had been a conspicuous presence at all the elevators and at nearly every corner, this floor seemed to operate on a different level of security—or perhaps, a different philosophy altogether.

There were no watchful eyes tracking my movements, no curious onlookers questioning my presence. It appeared that I had managed to slip into the 62nd floor unnoticed, a ghost among the shadows, my arrival and intentions still cloaked in secrecy—or so I hoped.

I paused outside the door, drawing a deep, steadying breath, before rapping lightly on the polished surface in front of me—even the doors on this floor were made out of some strange kind of metal. As I waited, the seconds ticked by, each one stretching longer than the last, amplifying my growing anxiety.

The silence from within was unnerving.

'Did I get the wrong door...?' I wondered, my mind racing.

Quickly, I revisited Mr. Stirling's notes, cross-referencing them with my current position and the detailed map he had provided. *'No, this is definitely the right place,'* I confirmed to myself, a sense of relief intermingling with my persistent unease.

With a bit more force, I knocked again, pondering various reasons for the lack of response. Perhaps the person inside was hard of hearing, lost in some music through their headphones, or even fast asleep?

But, much to my frustration, the door remained as unresponsive as before.

'Great. With all the plans and contingencies I had prepared, I never once considered that my contact might just... not be here,' I thought, a mix of annoyance and disbelief clouding my thoughts. Mr. Stirling had been quite certain they would be present. *'So, what's the next move, Sera? Stand here like a lost tourist, or...?'*

The question hung unanswered in the air, as I stood there, momentarily at a loss.

Resolved to try just once more, I knocked on the door again, this time with a firm but restrained hand. I was cautious not to make enough noise to pique the curiosity of any nearby residents. If this attempt failed, my next course of action would be to message Mr. Stirling, as per my backup plan that I had just come up with.

This time, however, there was a response, albeit a subtle one.

Through the door, which too appeared to be made of some sturdy metal, I could barely make out the sound of what seemed like a heavy object being shifted inside.

'Could it be that they've barricaded themselves in?' I wondered, my imagination kicking into overdrive at the muffled sounds emanating from the apartment.

Suddenly, a quiet, mechanical voice emerged from my left, emanating from a small black square on the door. I had initially overlooked this feature, not knowing its purpose, but it now became clear that it was some sort of communication device.

"What do you want? Make it quick," said the voice, devoid of any natural human warmth or inflection.

Caught off guard by the voice's mechanical nature, I hesitated for a moment before responding. Leaning slightly towards the black square, I replied in a low, clear tone, "I'm here for a pick-up."

According to Mr. Stirling, that should be all the information my contact needed.

He had emphasised the importance of discretion; while his name carried some weight, he reminded me that mine did not. By casually dropping his name, especially in public, I would inadvertently shine a spotlight on myself—a risk I was not willing to take.

"A pick-up, you say?" came the reply from the voice, which then fell into an abrupt silence.

Feeling a bit unsure, I reasserted, "Ehh... Yes. A pick-up," after about half a minute of waiting, when it became apparent that there wasn't going to be any further response.

The whole interaction was shaping up to be quite peculiar, and I couldn't help feeling a bit out of my depth. There I was, expecting a slick, covert Operator-style mission, only to be met with a reclusive individual communicating through a voice modulator, seemingly reluctant to engage.

A weary sigh escaped me as I contemplated messaging Mr. Stirling for guidance. 'I really don't want to have to fall back on him for my very first task... That would be just too embarrassing.'

Suddenly, a hidden slot in the door slid open with a metallic rasp, catching me completely off guard. I instinctively jumped back from the door as a small, metallic hand extended through, clutching a data-shard.

Realising my mistake, I quickly stepped forward again and accepted the shard from the hand. However, before releasing it, the voice issued a stern warning, "For our mutual friend's hands *only*. I will know if you tried to access it. Don't even *think* about it."

With those ominous words, the hand withdrew, and the slot snapped shut. I could hear the sound of heavy furniture being shuffled back into place behind the door, resealing the fortress-like solitude of the apartment's occupant.

The entire sequence of events had left me somewhat bewildered, and I found myself scrambling to process what had just happened. '*Ehh... So, this is it, huh? Mission accomplished, I suppose?*' I thought, trying to affirm the success in my own mind.

I lingered for an extra minute, half-expecting the mysterious contact might have more to say, but the silence that followed was unbroken.

Deciding it was time to leave, I carefully tucked the data-shard into the folds of my scarf. This seemed a safer option than my pockets, particularly if I encountered any opportunistic pickpockets or found myself subjected to a cursory security check.

With a sense of relief, I made my way to the nearest elevator, thankful for the foresight I had in mapping out their locations earlier. This preparation paid off, allowing me to swiftly descend back to the 43rd floor in just a matter of minutes.

The fact that not a single soul had paid me any undue attention during my stint on the 62nd floor filled me with a quiet sense of pride.

I had managed to execute my task with a level of stealth and discretion that felt truly befitting of an Operator. It was a small but significant victory in my eyes. Feeling like a million bucks, I quickly made my way to Mr. Stirling's apartment and knocked on the door.

Barely any time had passed before Mr. Stirling opened the door.

Without exchanging preliminary greetings, he gestured for me to enter.

I found myself settling into the same seat I had occupied the day before, with Mr. Stirling taking his usual place across from me. His raised eyebrow was a clear, unspoken prompt for me to initiate the discussion about the purpose of my visit.

I carefully extracted the data-shard from the hidden folds of my scarf and slid it across the coffee table towards him, adding a touch of drama to the moment. *'I've always wanted to do that...'* I thought, a bit amused by my own theatrics.

"With this, my first delivery is completed," I said, managing a neutral grin despite the bubbling excitement inside. The thought that I had navigated my first task without any complications or problems was thrilling.

"Oh?" Mr. Stirling responded with a hint of surprise as he picked up the data-shard. "I'm impressed by your efficiency. I had assumed your visit was at the beginning of your task, not concluding your mission. Well done. Consider your first task a success. I'll reach out in a few days once I've determined the next steps for my investigation."

As he spoke, I noticed several notifications pop up.

The most prominent one, displayed in the corner of my vision by my cerebral interface, was from the credit account linked to my personage.

[(Insufficient Access) has transferred {c}75 to your account with the note: "{First delivery successful.}"]

I was thoroughly intrigued by the notification, as I had never seen (Insufficient Access) before. *'This must be some high-level privacy measure. Mr. Stirling is shaping up to be an invaluable contact, if I can manage to ingratiate myself more with him and get some pointers,'* I mused, already looking forward to seeking his advice in the future.

The 75 credits felt generous for the task's simplicity, but considering the risks involved, it wasn't an extravagant sum. Still, it was a significant amount, especially given that I was undertaking these jobs primarily to settle an existing debt.

"Thank you, Mr. Stirling. I'll await your message," I said, offering a respectful bow similar to the one I occasionally gave Mr. Shori. Rising from my seat, I prepared to leave.

Mr. Stirling escorted me to the door, parting with a reminder, "Take a day or two to rest, I won't have anything for you during that time. Should be a week at most. Let me know if you become unavailable during that time."

With a nod in acknowledgment, I made my way back to my apartment, my mind already racing with thoughts. *'First task successfully completed! Now, to decide where to allocate my new Skill Point...!'*