

Chapter 153 - Options

Being left alone in the silence of the apartment felt strangely... wrong.

Not peaceful, not restful—just *empty*. The quiet pressed in from all sides, thick enough that I could almost hear my own heartbeat echoing in it.

For all the buildup, all the fear and bracing I'd done before that talk with Valeria, the actual result was something I could never have predicted.

Not even close.

'I guess I'll have to see how she acts around me now,' I thought, leaning back in the chair and staring at nothing. *'Mother and daughter? Colleagues? Co-conspirators? What the hell are we, even?'*

There wasn't a clean label for it. Maybe there never would be.

But at least I had time—an entire day, apparently—to sit with it. A forced pause. Probably the first real downtime I'd had since waking up in that hospital bed, if I really thought about it.

She hadn't been exaggerating about the guards either.

One glance at the door's monitor confirmed it: Four EtherLabs Security Officers, heavy gear, patrol pattern covering both sides of the hallway. Though, to be entirely fair, I didn't really feel like stepping outside right about now anyway, considering everything that had happened yesterday.

So... rest and recovery sounded... surprisingly nice.

Somewhat unreal, even.

I let out a long breath and tried to drag my brain out of the spiral it wanted to lock into.

'Think. Prioritize. One thing at a time.'

"Alright... first order of business: wound maintenance," I muttered aloud, mostly to make the empty space feel less predatory.

I headed toward the bathroom.

The spray-bandage on my neck peeled away with a faint tacky sound, and I lightly touched the skin beneath. Tender, but intact.

The Rest Function had done its job once more—borderline perfectly.

Which meant I now needed to *pretend* to still be injured.

Fantastic.

If Valeria was starting to piece together my connection to Anima, that was one thing. But the System? The Rest Function? Instant full recovery overnight with no lingering scarring?

Absolutely not.

'She almost certainly doesn't know about the System... Not yet, at least. Best to keep it that way as long as possible.'

I stepped into the shower and let the warm water run over me. Dried blood, smoke, someone else's spit, dust, fear—all washed down the drain in slow, rust-tinged spirals.

Then, carefully, I reapplied the spray-bandage.

It took some awkward angles, a bit of [Contortion] and [Acrobatics] to get the coverage even, but eventually it looked right—slightly healed, still tender and fully covered in the bandage in a perfect spread.

The kind of wound that would plausibly linger for days.

Better to put in the effort now than risk Valeria deciding to personally redo the bandage later.

Knowing her, she'd take one look at a sloppy application and interpret it as both an insult *and* a failure of standards on my part. And if I was supposed to be her *new daughter*—whatever the hell that meant—then running around with subpar first aid was definitely not on-brand.

'Maybe an avenue to pursue to get some first aid knowledge shards or lessons...?'

I shelved the thought for now and drifted back into the living room, the apartment feeling too quiet in a way I couldn't quite describe.

I only really had two things I could do while being "grounded" in here: Deal with the [General Skill Point] and deal with the [General Perk Point].

And between the two, the Skill Point was definitely the one less likely to make me cry or spiral into a life crisis, so... yeah. Easy wins first.

I needed one of those.

I pulled up my [Attributes] Interface, watching the numbers settle into place:

[<-- Attributes -->]

Body 5: 4,700 / 5,000xp

Reflex 5: 4,700 / 5,000xp

Intellect 4: 2,100 / 4,000xp

Intuition 5: 1,900 / 5,000xp

Edge 5: 1,800 / 5,000xp

Tech 3: 1,800 / 3,000xp

Ego 5: 2,400 / 5,000xp

Anima 2: 1,200 / 2,000xp

There it was. The depressing reality check.

As much as I *wanted* to rocket Anima upward as fast as possible, dumping a [General Skill Point] for just 800 XP on a Rank 2 Attribute was a straight-up waste. Same for Tech—much as it hurt to admit. I really *wanted* to get deeper into crafting eventually, but wanting and being able were two entirely different things.

Intellect was also off the table—the XP payout would be too small.

And Ego *definitely* didn't need the help. It was basically speed-running itself at this point.

Which left: Intuition, Edge, and the physicals—Body and Reflex.

'*Yep. That tracks,*' I thought, nodding to myself like I had any idea what I was doing. '*The Perk Point is going to suck... so let's enjoy this small moment of clarity while it lasts.*'

Truthfully, I kept circling back to the physical Attributes.

The last twenty-four hours had made it painfully clear that raw survivability and speed mattered more than anything lofty or clever. Sure, Intuition might've helped in the conversation with Valeria—but that opportunity had already come and gone. And Edge was great for long-term balancing, but right now? I was getting thrown into straight-up *meat grinder* situations regularly enough that survival stats felt like the responsible choice.

Very rarely did I have the luxury of handling problems with charm and composure.

Everything lately had been emergency after emergency.

Knife fights and torture and bleeding out on the kitchen floor weren't exactly situations where *suaveness* was the deciding factor.

If I wanted to stay alive, I needed to move faster and hit harder.

Plain and simple.

That left the physical Attributes—Reflex and Body—whispering to me like smooth-tongued devils, promising that if they'd just been higher, I could've stopped some of what happened yesterday.

'*Nonsense,*' I reminded myself, because I knew exactly where that line of thinking led. '*If Valeria got tossed around like a broken doll, there's no universe where even a Body 10 and Reflex 10 version of me could've stopped any of it.*'

Still... they looked *really* damn tempting.

Right now, each of them only needed about 200xp to hit the next Rank. Two hundred.

That was nothing.

I could grind that out in under forty-eight hours with a little bit of elbow grease. And once the Rank-Up hit, I could put the [General Skill Point] right into the new Level of the Skill.

Which meant: I wouldn't just be getting Level 6.

I'd be getting the full Rank 6 experience bar, all the way up to the threshold for *Level 7*.

Six. Thousand. Experience.

And not the early-game baby XP either—the high-tier stuff that always felt like pulling teeth to gain.

After all, the higher your Attributes got, the harder it became to make progress.

Actions that used to grant XP just... stopped.

Like that time early on, after waking up in the hospital and getting dumped at home by Oliver, where simply lifting my legs onto the coffee table counted as "Body Training." Now? I could grind through an entire workout circuit and maybe get a handful of pity-drops—if I was lucky.

Most gains came from long-term consistency now, not single bursts.

Combat helped, sure. But relying on *life-or-death brawls* to level up was not exactly a sustainable training plan.

So a free 6,000 XP of high-level Attribute gains? Yeah, that was *extremely* difficult to ignore.

And since I'd already convinced myself on *that*, the actual question became:

Which one? Body or Reflex?

Body meant being harder to grab, harder to pin. Two Ranks in Body meant that when those Corpo agents tried to dogpile me, it wouldn't have been so easy to hold me down and cut into me. I still wouldn't have been able to win outright—but fighting the grapple would've been... different; easier.

But Reflex... Reflex was *speed*.

I *knew* that my speed had saved Gabriel and me yesterday.

[Lethal Flow] coming in clutch at the just the right time, but without enough Reflex to make use of the extremely small timeframe between each kill, I would have been unable to do anything.

If I'd been any slower, if I'd hesitated by even a fraction, we'd both be corpses on the floor, riddled with bullet holes.

*'I **have** been leaning more speed-demon so far. But is that because it's what I prefer... or because I never had the Body to be anything else?'*

In games, I always defaulted to hybrid builds, Switch Hitters—range first, knives or melee to finish.

Never too squishy, never too slow; strike from afar, then close in when it counted.

But this wasn't theorycrafting.

This was real-life consequences, bones and pain and blood and terror.

No reloading a save.

No "try again."

I needed the Attribute that would keep me alive the *next* time a door exploded inward or an agent twice my size tried to pin me to the ground and torture me for whatever purposes they intended.

'Think long-term later. Survive now.'

And that... ultimately sealed the deal.

Body was definitely useful—and something I knew I'd have to grind harder and harder going forward—but Reflex was what had kept me alive yesterday. Reflex was the thing that had let me move first, react first, *think* in motion. Reflex was how I stayed one step ahead of the people trying to kill me. And in terms of growth speed, I'd get more actual usability out of faster reaction and movement than I would out of just being harder to toss around.

So Reflex it was.

The decision settled into me with a surprising sense of relief. A small win. Something that felt *correct*, even if everything else around me was chaos. That tiny bit of confidence even gave me a bit of a high—right up until I pulled up the [General Perk Point] menu and saw the absolute hellscape of options I had available.

'God fucking damnit...'

Every tree I had ever unlocked was sitting there like a buffet table from the cruelest possible universe: more than seventy Perks, each of them powerful, each of them asking me to betray the others by picking just one.

'That's so damn rude...'

So I dug in. Properly. I went one by one. From [Meditation]—the first Skill I had ever gotten in this world—all the way down to [CQC], the most recent addition to the list. I read descriptions. I weighed benefits. I tried to imagine how they would come into play in every possible crisis scenario.

And slowly—thankfully—a lot of them fell off the list on their own.

[Immovable Defense] from [Martial Arts], for example, was the easiest skip in the universe: Yeah, it was strong. Yeah, it would give stance-work and better grounding.

But I already had [Elemental Balance].

That Perk had quite literally rewritten the very way I *moved*.

It did everything [Immovable Defense] could do, only on a whole different philosophical axis—with the creepy muscle-control thrown in as a bonus—making the Perk almost entirely obsolete, unless I specifically required the defensive stances for anything.

Which I didn't.

On the other side of the spectrum, there were Perks like [Cooling Concoction] from [Cooking]—practical, valuable, even sellable—but completely useless for the current stage of “people are kicking down my walls and trying to kill me and my brother” life.

So I kept pruning. And pruning. And swearing a little. And then swearing a lot.

After about an hour of circling through descriptions and running mental simulations, I finally narrowed it down to three Perks—each sitting in a totally different corner of what I *could* be.

[Debugging] from [Programming]. And from [Acrobatics], both [Cat's Grace] and [Air Dodge]—with the added note that [Cat's Grace] also existed under [Athletics], giving me some tree-flexibility down the line.

[Debugging] had been my knee-jerk reaction, and honestly, I couldn't even blame myself for it. It was absurdly strong. Always-useful.

The kind of Perk that paid off immediately and kept paying off forever.

I had nearly taken it the moment [Programming] hit Level 3, and even now, thinking it over again with a clearer head, it still felt like the logical pick. I already had [Programming Maestro], and combining that with [Debugging] would put me two-thirds of the way toward basically being a god in anything code-related.

Not to mention that having [Debugging] would fix the very issues that [Programming Maestro] introduced in the first place. If I'd had both Perks during the all-night sprint before the Operator Meeting, I probably could have shaved a quarter of the time off of building [Venom Bite]—maybe even made the damn thing run smoother while I was at it.

'It really would have been so much cleaner...'

But the other two Perks I'd shortlisted weren't slouches either—they just served entirely different needs.

[Air Dodge] was one of those deceptively small-seeming abilities that would probably flip the board in any real fight. Being able to reorient mid-air didn't mean double-jumping or anything ridiculous like that, but momentum control in midair was huge.

Every time I pictured it, I thought of Kenzie—how she moved like gravity was more of a suggestion than a rule.

The idea of surpassing her in agility was... honestly kind of fucking hilarious.

'*She'd throw an absolute fit,*' I thought, smirking at the mental image of her staring at me like I'd grown a second head, ready to argue with Miss K that I was definitely cheating, somehow.

Then there was [Cat's Grace], the dark horse of the trio. I hadn't realized the value of it until I'd actually left Delta and seen the city with my own eyes—vertical highways hanging over more highways, catwalks above walkways above drop shafts above drop shafts.

Neo Avalis wasn't just tall. It was *stacked beyond belief*.

And I'd never exactly been a fan of heights. Not scared, of course.

Just respectful.

A very sensible amount of respect for the little inconvenience called terminal velocity.

And [Cat's Grace] didn't just lessen fall damage either—it meant I could hit the ground wrong and still recover cleanly.

And if there was one thing I was beginning to accept about my lifestyle lately, it was that I was very likely going to get thrown. Or shoved. Or knocked off something.

Probably multiple times.

Banking everything on "don't get touched ever" was a fast-track to breaking my ankle at the worst possible moment and promptly dying like an idiot.

So it came down to a simple question:

Did I need more *in-combat flexibility*, or did I need *out-of-combat* stuff?

'*One can never have enough in-combat alternatives, really...*' I chided my own thinking, but let it slide—because it was me doing the thinking.

I couldn't exactly get too upset at my own choice of words.

Madness lay that way and I had decided that today wasn't a day for madness.

Somewhere in the middle of weighing my Perk options, something else on the Interface completely derailed me.

"What the—since when is *that* here?!" I blurted out, staring at the System Interface like it had personally offended me; because it had.

I had wandered into the [Active Abilities] tab—one I had never bothered to look at before. I'd always figured it would just show the usual suspects: [Appraisal], [Blademaster's Throw], [Blademaster's Strike].

The stuff I *knew* I had.

But there it was: A *fourth* entry.

Just sitting there. Mocking me.

And the worst part? It wasn't new. It had been there for a good while.

I actually remembered getting excited about [Martial Arts] being Rare-tagged, which meant it came with an Active Ability at some point, which for [Martial Arts], I had known that it was at Level 3. And I was Level 4 now.

So I'd apparently had this thing sitting in my back pocket while I was busy... I don't know, bleeding, improvising, and not dying?

'How the fuck did I miss this...?' I asked myself, equal parts annoyed and embarrassed.

The System *should* have notified me, right? Or maybe it had, and I was just a bit overwhelmed at the time with—*oh, right*—offloading an illegal firearm, dodging being found out by Mr. Stirling (rest in peace), and dealing with the aftermath of the Damien situation.

So, sure. Maybe I was allowed a little oversight, here and there.

'Madness, Sera. Remember: Not today,' I reminded myself, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Either way—there it was:

[Flow] (Martial Arts)

Enter a state of *Flow*, targeted towards a single opponent you can perceive, greatly increasing your physical and mental capabilities in direct combat, but narrowing your focus to anything besides.

A double-edged sword, plain as day, but also absurdly useful for one-on-one engagements.

The description, of course, was vague in that very *System* way.

*'Would it **kill** you to give numbers?'* I thought, reading it again. *'Or, I don't know, an example? A hint? A friendly post-it note? Fucking **something** more to work with than the most vague shit of all time?'*

Silence. As usual.

But that one discovery shifted the entire landscape of my Perk dilemma.

With a strong in-combat option already sitting in my lap, it suddenly didn't make nearly as much sense to stack even *more* combat-only tools on top of it. Especially not when [Debugging] was *right there*—shiny, perfect, and practically *begging* to be taken.

The thought of pairing it with [Programming Maestro] before I even hit Level 6 was... honestly kind of thrilling.

'Not like I'm planning to throw myself into another life-or-death brawl anytime soon... I think I've hit my quota for near-death experiences for at least the next couple of weeks—months, if the universe feels generous for once.'

With that thought, I realized I had already made my choice the moment I saw [Flow]. The entire internal debate had just been me politely pretending I was considering my options.

I was already rationalizing [Debugging], stacking argument after argument to justify it.

There was no point dragging it out.

So I did what any seasoned overthinker does when they catch themselves spiraling—I cut the rope.

I pulled up the [General Perk Point] selection and locked in the choice before I could talk myself into another hour of mental gymnastics.

[System]: *Use [General Perk Point] on [Debugging] (Programming)? Y/N*

[System]: *You have **gained** the Perk [Debugging] (Programming).*

“Haaa...” The sigh came from somewhere deep in my ribs, tension bleeding out of me. “That’s way better.”

With the Perk handled, the only thing left was the easy part: Prepping for the Attribute bump.

That meant burning enough Bonus Experience to push Reflex and Body up to their thresholds and then working myself into the ground until the System chimed and handed over the Level-up rewards.

Which, realistically, meant that my “mandatory rest day” was about to turn into what could only be politely described as a personal training montage.

Alone.

In an apartment that still smelled faintly of industrial disinfectant and yesterday’s remaining... everything.

I rolled my shoulders once—neck stinging a bit where the spray-bandage sat—and looked toward the living room floor.

“Alright,” I muttered to myself.

“Time to get to work...”