

Chapter 120 - Upgrades

“Alright, everyone,” Miss K raised her voice, loud enough to catch the rest of the class’s attention, “make sure you each grab one of the teal-coloured tubs on your way out. Apply the ointment inside generously tonight, because trust me—if you don’t, you’re gonna wake up tomorrow feeling like you got hit by a truck. I pushed you all way beyond reason today, so the least I can do is give you something to help with the inevitable aftermath.”

And there it was.

‘God damnit, Ego... You seriously bet my entire body’s health on Miss K providing something like this? That’s reckless as fuck!’ I silently cursed it, but honestly, I couldn’t stay too mad.

After all, it had gotten me some seriously valuable data—most importantly, the revelation that Ego itself wasn’t actually infallible.

It had a very real, tangible limit.

That meant I couldn’t rely on it forever, not in every situation.

I’d already been leaning toward that realization, especially after the recent [Murder]-related incidents, but this had definitely solidified that train of thought. Ego had something like an energy gauge, and when it hit empty, I was going down—*hard*.

‘Good thing I’d already started using it to improve myself, instead of just letting it handle everything, huh...?’

For once, I felt like I’d finally gotten ahead of the curve on something System-related—if only by a few hours.

“Make sure to check your blue shards later when you’ve got time,” Miss K continued firmly, eyeing the group. “I’ll be uploading some updated exercises and training regimens tailored specifically for each of you. Go through them in the next few days. All of them. I don’t expect mastery, but at least give each one a serious attempt and get a good feel for them.”

A chorus of “Yes, Master” and “Yes, Sensei” answered her, everyone looking appropriately serious.

I tried shifting upright again, only to find my body stubbornly refusing to move, earning an amused glance from Miss K.

“You’re gonna have to sit tight for a bit longer, Sera,” she chuckled softly, shaking her head. “I’ll go grab something a bit more immediately effective for you.”

With that, she stood up and disappeared into her office, leaving me propped up against the wall, half-melted into a puddle.

I watched quietly as the rest of the class collected their teal tubs, grabbing their bags and slowly heading out. Tom gave me his typical polite nod, Jin offered a rough but approving grunt, and Kenzie threw me a playful wave, ears flicking cheerfully as she turned toward the door.

But there was something different about the way they all looked at me now.

Not fear, thankfully—more like cautious curiosity.

They'd definitely noticed the shift. I wasn't just the group's quirky "natural" anymore; I'd suddenly become an actual threat, a rival they had to seriously watch out for.

"See you soon, Sera!" Kenzie called over her shoulder, flashing a toothy, mischievous grin. "Shoot me a message sometime if you wanna hang out, yeah?"

'That does sound pretty nice...' I admitted silently, feeling a brief pang of longing before quickly shaking it off. *'Like I've got the damn luxury of free time right now. Maybe after I finally sort out this stupid Operator business...?'*

A moment later, Miss K emerged from her office, holding an auto-injector.

"I'm usually not a fan of pumping actual drugs into my students," she began. "But you really did a number on yourself out there, kid. I can't exactly leave you melting into the floor of my dojo all day, now can I?" She sighed, shaking her head ruefully. "I probably should've stopped you sooner, but honestly... It looked like you were making some *serious* progress out there. Couldn't bring myself to get in the way."

Her expression hardened slightly, eyes locking onto mine with a firm seriousness. "This is a *one-time* thing, alright? Consider it a free pass while you're adjusting to that strange new... whatever-it-is you've got going on."

I nodded quickly, fully on board with her logic.

It definitely wasn't my plan to leave every dojo session like this—broken, beaten, and barely able to function. Sure, the experience gains would be incredible—and I was practically salivating at the thought of finally checking those notifications later, safely away from prying Anima Sight eyes—but honestly? I *much* preferred being able to walk out under my own power.

"Alright then," Miss K continued, holding up the injector casually, "this right here's Diamond Four. Military-grade healing enhancer. Strong stuff, but it's about the only thing I had on hand that wouldn't wreck you with nasty side effects."

My eyes went wide at that.

Diamond Four was definitely something I remembered vividly from the game.

It was practically the gold standard of mid-to-high-tier medical autoinjectors—the kind of miracle juice the player character would spam after taking bullets, knife wounds, or even

worse. It stitched you back together so well it was practically cheating, and—just like Miss K said—without all the messy drawbacks that usually came with that kind of power.

Sure, there'd been something in the lore about soldiers getting temporary paranoia after using it, but compared to the alternatives, it was practically harmless. A few hours of jumpiness? Worth it, considering other injectors at that power level often left you shaking, nauseous, hallucinating for days or far, far worse.

But to think Miss K would use something like Diamond Four for something like simple dojo aftercare of all things...? Honestly, it felt borderline insane.

*'Then again... I guess this **is** technically some kind of top-tier dojo, right? Maybe this is just another Tuesday for scions and their crazy-rich circles?'*

I hadn't exactly spent much time around people with money in my past life—hell, I barely knew anyone who hadn't been scraping by paycheck-to-paycheck. But if this was the kind of treatment someone could casually get here, even as just a one-time emergency measure?

Yeah, you *definitely* wouldn't catch me complaining.

"Thank you, Miss K," I offered weakly, giving her a small nod as my limbs still stubbornly refused to cooperate.

She chuckled softly, giving me a playful wink. "Don't mention it, kid," she replied, before jamming the auto-injector into my neck with practiced ease. The cool, sparkly and semi-transparent liquid flooded into my bloodstream, tingling sharply beneath my skin.

"You should be back on your feet in just a few minutes," she added, standing back up. "I gotta handle some stuff in the office—mind if I leave you here to marinate?"

I shook my head slowly. No reason to keep her from her work, after all.

"Perfect," she said, heading toward the office door. She paused just before stepping inside, throwing me a pointed look over her shoulder. "Oh, and by the way—I want a full rundown on what in the Lords happened back there, plus a detailed report on whatever it is you learned today. Whenever you're ready, alright?"

Before I could even process this, much less respond, she disappeared into the office, leaving me propped against the wall, waiting for the Diamond Four to start doing its magic...

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Slamming the apartment door shut behind me, I let out a deep, exhausted sigh of relief before quickly heading straight toward Gabe's and my shared room.

I grabbed a fresh set of clothes and rushed into the shower, eager to wash away the layers of dried sweat, sticky ointment, and traces of blood still lingering from that absolutely brutal dojo session.

Getting home safely had honestly been nerve-racking enough on its own.

With the lingering threat of that psycho bitch potentially still out there plotting revenge—sulking at home or otherwise—I couldn't exactly shake the feeling of constantly being watched.

After all, there was nothing stopping her from hiring some goons to jump me, right?

A quick shower did wonders to relax my tense muscles, washing away the day's grime, and I swiftly tossed on my favorite casual wear before collapsing into bed, pulling my trusty cyberdeck into my lap.

I still had a program to finish. One final coding marathon—at least for a while, *hopefully*—but before I could jack into my link and lose myself in lines of code, there was one very important thing that absolutely demanded my attention first.

A low, eager chuckle escaped my lips as I navigated toward the System Interface in my cerebral overlay, anticipation buzzing in my fingertips.

It was time to check out just how much experience that insane marathon session at the dojo had netted me.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Manifestation] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Anima Attribute.

[System]: Anima Attribute has reached 2. *Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.*

[System]: 1,900xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

[System]: 800xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 1,200xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 700xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

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

[System]: 400xp gained for [Deception] Skill.

[System]: [Deception] Skill has *reached* Level 2. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download *available*.

[System]: 300xp gained for Edge Attribute.

[System]: 100xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

[System]: 500xp gained for [CQC] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

[System]: 500xp gained for Ego Attribute.

"Sheeesh..." I breathed, eyes widening at the flood of experience notifications.

That wasn't just "a little experience"; that was practically an entire bounty's worth of gains in a single dojo session.

'Maybe completely wrecking myself isn't the worst plan after all,' I mused with a smirk. *'Hell, this time I didn't even have to kill anyone for it. That's surely gotta count for something, right?'*

I was briefly puzzled when I noticed Anima and [Manifestation] had made the list of experience gains as well. I hadn't actually used either directly during the session—or at least, I didn't think so at first.

But then I remembered my earlier insight about the System itself potentially being some form of advanced Anima construct, powered heavily by [Manifestation].

'Right... the System always rewards insights—whether I like those insights or not...'

Still, an Anima upgrade definitely wasn't going to hurt anything, and the extra level-up for [Deception] couldn't have come at a more perfect time.

*'I **was** wondering what the hell to use my [General Skill Point] on,' I thought, excitement bubbling again, 'but with [Deception] hitting Level 2 just before the Operator meeting, that choice is pretty much made for me.'*

It felt oddly satisfying—almost *suspiciously* convenient—that things were finally lining up in my favor. A strange, nagging sense of unease tugged at me.

'Honestly, after the absolute shitfest of the past few days... maybe this is just the universe finally cutting me some slack?' I tried to reassure myself with some unhealthy levels of optimism, shaking off the unease.

Either way, I couldn't afford to waste time second-guessing it.

[Deception] was undeniably critical for the upcoming Operator meeting, and snagging an extra Perk right before going in? It was easily the best bang for my buck right now when it came to using the [General Skill Point] I still had banked.

There might've been better options down the line, sure—but the System wasn't exactly the patient type. It didn't let you sit on a point forever. Choices needed to be made, and right now [Deception] was practically screaming at me to give it a boost.

Settling deeper into the comfortable warmth of my bed, I let the System do its magic.

'Upgrade Anima Attribute.'

Almost instantly, my mind got slammed by the familiar deluge of System information—raw data flooding my brain, making my head spin for a moment.

Anima, as always, was a weird beast when it came to understanding it.

Even with the System force-feeding me knowledge, that didn't automatically mean all of it made any real, logical sense. If the first rank had given me a basic introduction to sprites—their colors and what they stood for—then this second rank took things a bit deeper.

The mana of this world—the sprites, colored and drifting through everything around us—were just manifestations of some ancient form of energy. Energy that had apparently existed forever in this world, yet had somehow faded into obscurity for most people.

The download clarified that the colors of sprites that I had learned about from the first download indicated their preferred forms of energy—but didn't actually *limit* them.

Blue sprites mostly handled information and states, sure, but that wasn't *all* they could do.

If I wanted sprites to produce some specific effect, I didn't necessarily have to hunt down a matching color; it just made things easier. Like working with something aligned with its nature instead of against it—less mana required, simpler control.

Finally, the last part of the information dump gave me a rough idea of how to nudge sprites toward following my intent.

Basically a quick-and-dirty guide to ordering sprites around more effectively.

I was still nowhere near mastering Anima—hell, I was barely scratching the surface here.

But this second level felt like it brought me a huge step closer to finally getting a grip on the whole concept.

I was, however, very surprised to see how relatively quickly the upgrade was settling down, feeling like I hadn't actually gotten that much from it, but as the surge of information began to settle down and my mind cleared, I took a deep breath and realised that the room was spinning around me.

'Wow... Okay, yeah—my bad,' I thought, pressing my palm to my forehead as the room spun gently around me.

I'd definitely underestimated how intense the Anima downloads could get. Even this relatively straightforward dump of information was hitting my mental capacity way harder than expected, leaving my head throbbing uncomfortably.

'Maybe during the next dojo session I can get Miss K's help with Anima Sight...'

No way was I about to gamble with that one alone. Risking losing my grip on those blue sprites currently protecting my vision from being flooded by raw mana sounded like the quickest path to a world of hurt. But with Miss K supervising and able to patch things back together if I messed something up? That sounded like exactly the kind of safe environment I'd need to properly explore this whole sprite-commanding business.

After a few moments—and once the dizziness finally subsided—I took a deep breath, steadied myself, and gave the System the mental thumbs-up for the [Deception] Level-Up next.

Immediately, another wave of information flowed into my brain—much gentler than the Anima stuff had been, but still a very noticeable rush of knowledge, as it always was.

This time, the topic was deception as a whole, with the System carefully threading slightly more advanced techniques into my existing mental framework.

It felt almost like I'd just wrapped up a few months in some sort of Rogue 101 class, finally getting past the bare basics and stepping into the slightly trickier stuff. Nothing crazy or overly complicated yet—just useful tricks and refinements that someone who'd been seriously studying deceiving people for a few months might pick up.

I quickly absorbed lessons on better controlling body language to mask intentions, subtly misdirecting attention through casual movements or strategic pauses.

The download gave me muscle memory for things like keeping a more convincingly neutral expression under pressure, tweaking my posture slightly to project confidence—or vulnerability—depending on what the situation demanded.

Coupled with my newly gained perfect muscle control from [Elemental Balance], this whole section was going to be invaluable going forward, I could immediately tell.

It even showed me small techniques for steering conversations without arousing suspicion thereof, gently nudging people's thoughts or reactions by carefully choosing when and how to speak, or by dropping subtle hints disguised as offhand remarks.

All of it practical, straightforward, and easy enough to put into action immediately—but clearly still surface-level. The kind of skills that screamed for more depth and further refinement down the line.

By the end of the download, though, I definitely felt more prepared for the Operator meeting.

It wasn't exactly groundbreaking stuff, sure, but it put me comfortably ahead of where I'd been just minutes ago.

'And we're not quite done yet, are we...?' I thought with a smug grin.

There was just something deeply satisfying—downright euphoric—about soaking up knowledge and experience straight from the System. Watching all the effort I'd poured into training finally come together in tangible gains like this was always an intoxicating reward.

Unable to resist any longer, I flipped open the [General Skill Point] selection interface, quickly tapping in [Deception] as my choice.

[System]: *Do you want to use 1x [General Skill Point] on [Deception] Skill? Y/N.*

I mentally confirmed without hesitation.

[System]: *You have used 1x [General Skill Point] on [Deception] Skill.*

[System]: *1,800xp gained for [Deception] Skill.*

[System]: *[Deception] Skill has reached Level 3. Perk Point Unlocked. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download available.*

Like an addict reaching for another hit, I immediately gave the go-ahead for the Level 3 [Deception] download, practically buzzing with anticipation.

Instantly, my brain flooded again—this time deeper, richer, and undoubtedly more intense.

If Level 2 had felt like finishing an introductory course, Level 3 was like wrapping up a full year's worth of deception-focused classes at rogue university.

The knowledge was complex but clearly structured in some way, stacking directly on top of the foundations I'd just gained moments earlier.

For instance, where Level 2 had taught me basic body-language manipulation—how to appear neutral or relaxed—this new download *significantly* sharpened those techniques.

Now I knew precisely how to project specific emotional states through subtle physical adjustments, like adding just a bit more tension to my jaw or shoulders to convincingly sell stress, or carefully modulating my breathing to project absolute calm even when panic hammered inside me.

I could tell that there was definitely a lot more still hidden behind this particular aspect, likely things that would be taught in future Level-Up downloads, but this initial, more in-depth example would already come in quite handy.

On top of that, however, the conversation-control methods I'd previously learned took another big step forward as well.

Now, instead of merely steering dialogue with casual comments or strategic pauses, I gained the corresponding knowledge for seamlessly planting subtle suggestions directly into someone's mind—given that they weren't privy to this kind of deception-focused conversation style as well, of course.

A carefully timed change of tone or a perfectly placed hesitation could gently nudge someone's perceptions, trust, or decisions—without ever letting them realize they'd been guided there in the first place.

But even beyond the mental tricks, this download brought in an entirely new dimension, one I had been looking forward to just as much—physical deception, especially in relation to combat and movement as a whole.

I now understood how to disguise my intentions during a fight more aptly: Small feints and false movements that could mislead an opponent into reacting prematurely or incorrectly, creating openings that hadn't existed moments before.

The System flooded my muscles with memory for things like subtly shifting weight to make it look like I was retreating when I planned to advance, or perfectly timing my breathing and posture to suggest fatigue, luring an enemy into underestimating me.

These were all things that I kind of had been doing already during the last dojo session, but far more subtle and worlds more refined—something I'd definitely need in the future, given that people like Tom especially would not fall for the same low-level feints I had been throwing more than once or twice at most.

By the end, the jump in my overall deception skill felt massive—no longer just useful for casual lies or deflecting suspicion, but powerful enough to influence entire interactions, combat scenarios included.

And with the stakes of that upcoming Operator meeting hanging over my head?

Yeah, I'd gladly take every possible advantage I could squeeze out of the System.

My brain felt positively mushy at this point.

The relentless, back-to-back downloads—especially kicking things off with the heavy-duty Anima upgrade—had definitely taken their toll. Honestly, my skull felt like it was stuffed with cotton candy, throbbing slightly as the mental fatigue settled in deep.

'I'll leave the [Deception] Perk for after the coding, I think...'

I sighed heavily, letting my eyes drift down toward the cyberdeck resting in my lap. There wasn't exactly much room for rest or recovery right now, unfortunately.

"Alright," I muttered, psyching myself up again. It was back to business.

That damn quick-hack had been haunting my every waking hour over the past few days, and it was about time I finally laid the thing to rest. Connecting into the development environment via my cerebral link, I settled deeper into the bed, preparing myself for yet another marathon of code-slinging, bug-squashing, and, finally, test-running...