

Chapter 56 - Refactoring

I expected to be woken up by pain, but instead, I was startled awake by yet another new type of chime I had never heard from the System before.

[System]: — *Start of Emergency Notice* —

[System]: *Maximum Skill threshold has been exceeded. Combine or Discard Skills until number of Skills is below the threshold again.*

[System]: *Current Maximum Skill threshold: 30*

[System]: *Current Number of Skills: 33*

[System]: *Thought-process accelerated and bodily functions locked until issue is resolved, in order to preserve User's wellbeing.*

[System]: — *End of Emergency Notice* —

It took me three solid reads to finally grasp the situation.

Even though the System seemed to have given my brain a turbo-boost, the whirlwind of recent events had me all tangled up in confusion.

The last vivid memory that was thoroughly etched into my mind was Kenzie's claws ruthlessly tearing through my eye in our final standoff, a memory so vivid and painful, yet at this moment, I felt oddly detached from any semblance of pain.

Here I was, aware yet unable to see or move, a peculiar paralysis set by the System's protective shutdown, if the notice it blasted at me was to be believed.

Frustratingly, I couldn't even shut the hovering System Interface, no matter how hard I willed it.

'I really went overboard with unlocking all those Skills yesterday, didn't I?' I mused to myself, attempting to inject some calm into the bizarre scenario I found myself in.

Waking up to an emergency alert from the System, especially after an experience as traumatic as losing an eye, was nowhere near what I had anticipated for the day.

Yet here I was, staring at the [Skill] screen that floated in my mind's eye, faced with some crucial decisions that I knew were immutable once made.

[<-- Skills -->]

[Meditation] Level 4 - 200 / 4,000xp (Intuition/Ego)

[First-Aid] Level 1 - 300 / 1,000xp (Intellect/Reflex)

[Juggling] Level 3 - 600 / 3,000xp (Reflex)

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

[Throwing] Level 4 - 400 / 4,000xp (Reflex)

[Knives] Level 3 - 1,200 / 3,000xp (Reflex)

[Programming] Level 3 - 500 / 3,000xp (Intellect)

[Netrunning] Level 2 - 400 / 2,000xp (Intellect)

[Manifestation] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (Intellect/Intuition)

[Cooking] Level 2 - 1,200 / 2,000xp (Intuition/Tech)

[Slicing] Level 1 - 100 / 1,000xp (>Intellect/Reflex<)
[Maid] Level 1 - 300 / 1,000xp (Body/Intuition)
[Stealth] Level 3 - 1,900 / 3,000xp (Edge)
[Athletics] Level 3 - 1,400 / 3,000xp (Body)
[Contortion] Level 1 - 700 / 1,000xp (>Body/Reflex<)
[Acrobatics] Level 2 - 600 / 2,000xp (Body/Edge)
[Poison] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (>Edge/Tech<)
[Deception] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Edge/Ego<)
[Appraise] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Intuition/Tech/Intellect<)
[Negotiation] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Ego/Intuition<)
[Quick-Hacks] Level 1 - 500 / 1,000xp (>Edge/Intellect<)
[Climbing] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (Reflex/Body)
[Jury-Rigging] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (>Intuition/Tech<)
[Murder] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (>Edge/Ego<)
[Singing] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (Intuition/Ego)
[Dancing] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (Reflex/Intuition)
[Drawing] Level 0 - 300 / 700xp (Intellect/Reflex)
[Tracking] Level 0 - 100 / 700xp (Intellect/Intuition)
[Lip-Reading] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (Intellect)
[Accounting] Level 0 - 100 / 700xp (Intellect)
[Tailoring] Level 0 - 400 / 700xp (>Reflex/Tech<)
[Medicine] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Intellect/Tech<)
[Martial Arts] Level 2 - 0 / 2,000xp (>Body/Reflex/Intuition<)

'Wow, that really *is* a hefty collection of Skills, isn't it?' I reflected, somewhat taken aback by the sheer number I had managed to amass in such a short span of time.

I knew I'd bump into this limit eventually, but, to be honest, I hadn't given it much serious thought since I landed in this new reality.

Back in the days of Neon Dragons, the game set a cap on how many Skills a player could have at once—starting at twenty. Sure, there were a couple of tricks to expand that capacity, but they weren't exactly lying around every corner.

Most builds had revolved around a roster of twenty-five Skills, banking on the assumption that snagging five extra slots was doable for the average Joe. The ceiling for Skills? Never quite pinned that down, though my gut pegged it somewhere between thirty to forty, based on nothing but gut feeling, really.

Given these constraints, the game designers had to get creative, because let's face it, some Skills were simply *too good* to pass. Staples like [Stealth], [First-Aid], and [Murder] were non-negotiable for just about any serious build.

To navigate the tricky waters of an overflowing Skill set, players had two main lifelines, which the System was now kindly pointing out to me as well: Combine and Discard.

Tossing a Skill into the virtual bin seemed pretty straightforward—hit Discard, and it's gone for good, stashed away in a no-go zone on my Skill list. Unless, of course, I decided to fish it back out from the depths of my self-imposed exile.

But combining? Now, that's where things got interesting.

Only a select few Skills could merge into some kind of Combo-Skill, making the choice less about decluttering and more about strategy. No way could I smash together something like [Murder] and [First-Aid] into a single, all-encompassing Combo-Skill.

The universe just doesn't work like that.

What's more, these new Skills weren't just some simple mash-up; they were their own beast with unique progression paths, governing Attributes, and even Perks that didn't exist in the parent Skills.

This bit was especially crucial for me.

Merging Skills meant I'd likely kiss goodbye to the detailed downloads from the individual Skills, trading them in for the more generic updates from the new, blended Skill.

'Great, just what I needed: More choices to make,' I mused sarcastically. 'But hey, cheers for the 30-Skill starting point, System. Considering the Skill smorgasbord this world offers, I'll take the head start.'

With a mental sigh, I revisited my Skill list, eyeing a few potential pairings that seemed like no-brainers for a merge.

I lined up [Singing], [Dancing], and [Juggling] in my mental checklist, eyeing them for a merge into [[Perform]].

Granted, I hadn't delved into the perks of [Singing] and [Dancing]—a mystery that would stay unsolved for now, given my current lock-in situation on this System prompt. [Juggling] had already thrown me a lifeline with the [Ambidexterity] Perk, a keeper if ever there was one.

'Hopefully, the merge doesn't make that Perk disappear into thin air,' I considered, tagging the trio for the blend. My mind did a quick scan for any other merge-worthy candidates, just in case.

[First-Aid] and [Medicine] flirted with the idea of forming some [Medic]-esque Skill, though that was more a stab in the dark than a sure-fire guarantee.

With [[Perform]], at least I knew what was in store.

Mulling it over, utilising the System's boosted brain speed to its fullest, I circled back to the same conclusion over and over again: Merging those three was the way to go.

The performance trio wasn't crucial for survival or immediate usefulness in my current life scenario. Plus, merging them wouldn't exactly erase my acquired abilities, just broadening their scope into something more generalised.

After a final mental nod to my decision, I punched in the information, eager yet simultaneously apprehensive about what my first Combo-Skill would end up providing.

[System]: *Do you really want to Combine the following Skills: [Singing], [Dancing], [Juggling]?*

[System]: *You will be granted the [[Perform]] Combo-Skill.*

[System]: *WARNING: This decision is irrevocable, **permanently** linking those Skills to [[Perform]]. You will not be able to unlock any of those Skills individually going forward, even if [[Perform]] is Discarded.*

[System]: *Combine [Singing], [Dancing], [Juggling] into [[Perform]]? Y / N*

Before I committed to my choice, I spared a thought for [Juggling], a silent shout-out to my humble beginnings. *'You've been a real game-changer. I won't forget the leg-up you gave me. Thank you.'*

It was more than just a Skill for me; it had been my comeback ticket post-coma, my sneak peek into the System's workings, not to mention it had handed me [Ambidexterity]—a real gem, both in-game and in this new reality of mine.

Letting it go did sting a bit.

But it wasn't as if I was erasing it entirely. The essence of [Juggling], and the finesse it brought me, would stay intact, ready to be called upon whenever.

With a mixed feeling of nostalgia and anticipation, I pressed confirm, bracing for the cascade of System alerts that followed.

[System]: *[Singing], [Dancing], [Juggling] Skills have been removed from User.*

[System]: *[[Perform]] Combo-Skill has been unlocked and granted to User.*

[System]: *[[Perform]] has been set to Level 3, in accordance with the highest Level combined Skill ([Juggling]).*

[System]: *[Ambidexterity] has been added to [[Perform]] Combo-Skill Perk Tree, in accordance with combined Skill's Perk choices ([Juggling]).*

[System]: *No other pre-existing Perks detected, skipping Perk selection.*

A wave of relief washed over me as I scanned the notifications.

'Phew, [Ambidexterity] is still mine. Wasn't totally sure how Perks would translate here, but looks like it's all good—maybe even more flexible than the game's setup?'

In Neon Dragons, Perks often carried over in Skill combos, but not always. Here, it seems like they get woven into the new Skill's Perk Tree, dodging any potential losses—which I was seriously thankful for.

Losing a Perk you've grown attached to would be a nightmare.

Still, the possibility of losing Perks wasn't *entirely* off the table.

Combining Skills with existing Perks could mean having to re-earn them, especially if the combined Skill starts at the highest level of its components. So, merging three level 3 Skills might mean choosing which Perk to keep—undoubtedly a crucial detail to remember for the future.

After merging those Skills, my tally was at 31/30.

I still needed to either drop a Skill or merge more.

'What to combine next...' I mused, eyeing my Skill list. Ideally, I'd free up a slot or two for future additions, avoiding a repeat of today's Skill cap drama, after the System checked for my Maximum Skill amount each morning.

The thought of hitting the Discard button was about as appealing as jumping into a pit of scavs without any real plan—basically, a no-go.

In the game, waving goodbye to [Accounting] might've made sense, but here, where even the most left-field Skill could turn into my next big break, I wasn't about to let anything go without a fight. The Perks from levelling, the detailed knowledge and muscle memory downloads from the System—they were too good to pass up.

But, here's the rub: My knowledge on Combo-Skills was about as in-depth as my knowledge about what lay behind the Wall itself.

'Should've paid more attention to those high-level builds...' I berated myself, realising my mental database of Combo-Skills was embarrassingly sparse.

Right now, the list of Skills staring back at me held potential for maybe one other Combo-Skill I was sure about. Exploring other combinations would be a shot in the dark, a gamble on what could merge into a Combo-Skill.

While the System would likely not simply delete my Skills on a wrong combination, I didn't really want to spend the next eternity trying to combine every single Skill in my list.

'Not exactly ideal to play mix and match without a clue...' I mused, weighing my options.

The idea of condensing my Skill list was a double-edged sword in itself.

'To combine or not to combine, that is the question...' I pondered, stuck in a loop of indecision about my next move.

Mashing Skills together into these Combo-Skills sounded great on paper—like getting a bargain at the Skills supermarket.

But the reality?

It's like expecting a seven-course meal and ending up with a buffet plate. Sure, there's variety, but you're not getting the best of each dish.

Take [[Perform]], my new Frankenstein creation.

It's neat, covering everything from belting tunes to busting moves on the dance floor, and yeah, juggling. But here's the catch: It was a jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

My juggling finesse? Capped.

Because now, [[Perform]] wasn't just about keeping balls airborne; it was an all encompassing entertainment package deal.

The depth of each individual skill gets watered down to make room for the breadth to fit all the Skills in.

As such, condensing down absolutely everything into Combo-Skills wasn't really something I should be aiming for either.

I couldn't help but lament my current situation.

I had always hated having to make choices, yet the System seemed to want to push more and more of them onto me at every turn, *'Why did I have to end up with the most stingy System of all time...? Why can't it just give me all the Skills, all the Perks and make me overpowered? Isn't this a fucking Isekai of sorts? Why did I get the one where the MC suffers and has to make choices all the time, what the fuck?'*

Navigating through my Skill set felt like walking through a minefield of potential combinations.

Right there, glaring at me from the screen, were [Blades] and [Knives], practically begging to be mashed together into some Combo-Skill.

I had other potential mergers on my mind, like [Medicine] and [Poison], or [Athletics] and [Contortion], but those were just shots in the dark, steeped in uncertainty.

And here's the thing: I wasn't ready to fuse them just yet.

I hadn't even scratched the surface of what they could offer on their own. Particularly with crafting skills—those were my golden geese.

The perks they promised? Game-changers.

The downloads from the System on those? Expected to be like discovering fire.

Considering my baseline knowledge on chemistry and engineering hovered around zero, those Skills were my crash course to becoming a Renaissance woman.

Yet, the [Blades] and [Knives] combo was on pause too. My gut told me to even their Levels out first.

Merging [[Perform]] had been a bit of a lightbulb moment.

It hadn't just merged the Skills; it preserved every scrap of knowledge and muscle memory the System had blessed me with from them.

Hanging onto every detail of [Juggling] despite its absence from my Skill list was a true revelation. It dawned on me that levelling up skills evenly before fusing them was the way to go.

This strategy promised the best of both worlds: The nuanced downloads from each Skill pre-merge and the broader strokes of knowledge post-merge for the Combo-Skill.

This left me in a bind over merging [Blades] and [Knives], given [Blades]' pitiful level one status versus [Knives]' impressive mid-level three stride.

'Might as well wait till [Knives] hits level four, at the very least...'

So there I was, stuck in a mental loop, pondering potential merges without making any headway.

'System, you're a heartless fucking jailer,' I silently lamented, railing against the digital warden of my skill set. *'Torture. Pure torture, I say!'*

My pleas fell on deaf bytes, the System entirely indifferent to my distress.

'Alright... If we aren't combining anything right now... Then Discard is the only other option available,' I finally yielded, realising that I'd have to do something to move forward with my life or be stuck in the current situation forever—the mere thought sending shivers down my spine.

Trapped in my own mind, unable to connect with anything beyond, felt like the ultimate nightmare-level horror story playing out in real time.

Yet, dwelling on this bleak reality wasn't an option I entertained for long.

Instead, my thoughts fast-forwarded to the pressing matter of making a choice.

'It's gotta be [Drawing], right? I'll hardly ever use it. Not really useful for me in my current life, I don't think? Sure, it might have some interesting Perks down the line, but something's gotta give...'

Of all the skills in my arsenal, [Drawing] seemed the most expendable.

[Accounting] and [Lip-Reading] were also on the chopping block, but those felt like they could be useful in some niche situations.

Plus, the more I thought about it, the more I realised I might be vastly underestimating [Accounting]. Given the corporate- and credit-driven world I was in, knowing one's way around numbers could end up being invaluable.

'[Accounting] has to be more than just budgeting. It's not the time to ditch it,' I mused, sensing there were layers to it I hadn't explored yet. I'd have to stick with it at least until I got the first or second knowledge download, just to make sure.

I wavered, my mind doing somersaults over the decision, but each time I landed back at square one: [Drawing] was the expendable one.

Dropping to 30/30 skills was a compromise I was willing to make for now, keeping [Lip-Reading] as a backup discard option for the future. Its utility could increase with Levels, but for the moment, it wasn't serving any immediate purpose.

'Discarding isn't the end. I can always bring it back if I regret this,' I reassured myself, trying to lighten the mood.

The possibility of regret always loomed over decisions like these, yet I reminded myself of the flexibility the System allowed. *'Stay light on your feet, Sera. It's just a step, not a leap off a cliff.'*

With those thoughts, I punched in the information.

[System]: *Do you really want to Discard the following Skill: [Drawing]?*

[System]: *The Skill will be subsequently Locked and will be unable to be gotten again, until specifically Unlocked by User.*

[System]: *Discard [Drawing]? Y / N*

Hitting the confirmation quickly, as if that would somehow make it easier, like ripping off a band-aid of sorts, I immediately closed the System Interface, feeling my body return to normal almost instantaneously.

[System]: *[Drawing] Skill has been removed from User.*

[System]: *[Drawing] Skill has been added to list of Locked Skills and will be unable to be obtained again until Unlocked.*

I breathed a sigh of relief, now feeling my chest lift up and down as I breathed again, something I hadn't felt at all over the past... Well since I "woke up".

I had no idea how much time had actually passed, but I couldn't remember taking a single breath, nor hearing a single one of my heartbeats, as I was contemplating the Skill issue.

'It really did accelerate my thought process a lot, huh?' I couldn't help but think, as I slowly acclimated myself with my own body again, making sure everything was where I thought it should be.

The one thing I did not, however, was open my eyes—or eye, now.

The memory of my eye being savagely torn out haunted me, making the idea of opening my remaining eye daunting. My fear wasn't just about the loss of sight; it was about the broader implications.

In my previous life, any form of disability felt like a societal death sentence, complicating job prospects and social interactions due to misconceptions about one's capabilities.

The fear of waking up disabled, potentially leading to homelessness or worse, was a nightmare scenario I had always dreaded and that had kept me up at night more than I would care to admit.

But I reminded myself, *'This world is different. With advancements in cybernetics, bionics, and genetics, a temporary disability shouldn't be a major setback. I'll find a way to afford the necessary repairs... I'm sure of it.'*

With this thought, I mustered the courage to attempt opening my eye, ready to face whatever awaited me.

As I gingerly opened my eyes, bracing for a disorienting haze or a void where my vision should have been, I was met with a startling revelation—my vision seemed entirely unchanged.

'Is this really how it feels?' I pondered in awe, marvelling at the resilience and adaptability of the human brain, how swiftly it adjusted to the loss, compensating for the absence of an eye with such seamless efficiency that it momentarily fooled me into feeling whole.

My brief wonderment at human biology's marvels was cut short by the sound of approaching footsteps. Footsteps that sounded eerily fast and purposeful.

I took this fleeting moment of solitude to survey the room I was in, trying to figure out just what exactly was going on.

It was sterile and functional, with the blank, white walls of a medical facility, illuminated by the soft, ambient light that cast no shadows, making the room feel almost ethereal.

Beside the bed I lay in were various medical instruments and monitors, some mirroring the ones I had seen when I had first awoken in this world, their screens flickering with a calming, rhythmic cadence that mirrored the stillness of the room.

Before I could take in more details though, the door burst open, admitting a figure whose attire screamed 'medical professional,' with the pristine white coat and the calm yet focused demeanour characteristic of someone accustomed to emergencies.

His presence filled the room with a sudden urgency, pulling me back from my contemplations to the reality of my situation and the immediate concern for my well-being.

His puzzled expression left me slightly bewildered, as I locked eyes with the doctor, whose look of astonishment mirrored my own internal confusion.

"Um, hi...?" I managed, the uncertainty in his voice echoing the turmoil of thoughts swirling within me. "Ehh... Hello, Miss Vildea...? Are you... Are you alright?"

"I mean, should I not be okay?" I countered, striving to maintain a calm facade despite the whirlwind of questions raging in my mind.

'Did Miss K spill the beans about my bizarre situation?' I speculated wildly, already devising desperate escape plans, though deep down, I knew I stood no chance if this was some secretive corporate lab.

"No, no, it's not like that at all! It's just... I'm relieved, really," he clarified hastily, adopting a more professional tone that provided a small measure of reassurance. "Your sudden

awakening took us by surprise, considering the emergency signals we were getting from your aEEG. But, seeing you conscious and coherent now suggests it might've just been a glitch with the equipment..."

The middle-aged doctor, with his expression of mild surprise gradually easing into professional curiosity, took my hesitant nod as consent and proceeded with the examination.

"Excellent, let's ensure everything's in order, then," he murmured, his tone imbued with a reassuring professionalism that somewhat alleviated my underlying anxiety about the whole situation.

Approaching me with a compact penlight, he began by carefully illuminating my left eye, observing the reaction of my pupil. Given its cybernetic nature, I wondered if he'd notice anything amiss, but my concerns were unfounded.

The doctor seemed well-versed in distinguishing between the natural responses of my brain reacting to the stimulus and the artificial responses of the cybernetic eye, his scrutiny meticulous but not overly invasive.

Transitioning smoothly, he then directed the beam towards my right side, repeating the process with a keen eye for any discrepancy.

Throughout, he peppered me with questions—about any discomfort, changes in my field of vision, or peculiarities in my perception. His inquiries were methodical, aimed at comprehensively assessing my condition without causing any undue distress.

I found myself answering with a straightforward honesty; there was no deviation in my experience to report. The simplicity and routine nature of the exam, reminiscent of those cranial nerve exam ASMR videos that had lulled me to sleep in another life all so often, lent a surreal edge to the reality of my situation.

Despite the calm it evoked, I couldn't shake the feeling of being on the precipice of something unknown, teetering between relief and apprehension as I awaited the doctor's final verdict.

The revelation that both my eyes were operational sent me into a whirlwind of confusion.

"Hold up, you mean *both* my eyes?" I couldn't mask the bewilderment in my voice, prompting the doctor to give me a puzzled look, as though I'd suddenly started speaking in riddles.

Carefully, I tested my sight by alternately shutting each eye, fully expecting a plunge into darkness with the closure of my left eye. However, to my astonishment, my view merely shifted, undimmed, as I peered through my right eye alone.

"Wait... What?!" I exclaimed louder than intended, my surprise causing the doctor to startle. Without thinking, my fingers flew to my face, probing the eye socket and the nasal bridge, which elicited a sharp twinge of pain.

"Yikes, that stings!" I winced, recoiling from my own touch.

The doctor's response was swift, his tone laced with a mix of caution and mild reprimand, "Please, Miss Vildea, avoid disturbing your surgical site! It's too soon for such a rigorous examination!"

His concern halted my impromptu self-assessment, and he fetched a small, enigmatic black cube from my bedside table. After a brief interaction with the device that seemed to activate it, he extended it towards me with an offer of a mirror.

'Surgery? I had surgery?' The thought ricocheted through my mind, halting my movements as the doctor watched, a wave of relief passing over him once I ceased my self-prodding.

As he handed me the cube, now functioning as a mirror, curiosity overtook my initial shock.

'A reconstruction... because of training?' I mulled over the words, my gaze fixed on my reflection.

Despite the evident surgery scars crisscrossing the bridge of my nose and encircling the socket of my right eye, where I vividly remembered Kenzie's claws performing their gruesome ballet, my eye was intact—miraculously staring back at me.

"H-how is this even possible?" I stammered, barely above a whisper, lost in the reflection of my own incredulous eyes.

"You are one of Miss Kanis' students," he simply said, as if that explained everything.

When I returned his answer with a blank stare, he seemed to catch the hint and elaborated further. "Ahh...! The Arkion Dojo is a long-standing institution of Ether Labs. It is one of the foremost training grounds for young scions and as such, naturally has a tight connection with several medical facilities owned by Ether Labs. While Miss Kanis' courses cost quite a pretty sum, if I may be so free to admit, there is a very good reason for that: All-Encompassing medical insurance."

My face remained completely blank, this time from sheer disbelief, rather than failure to understand, but this nuance seemed to evade the good doctor.

"...What I mean to say is this: You were brought in here with severe injuries and a missing eye as a direct result of your training under Miss Kanis, which means you were eligible for a full reconstruction surgery, as well as a replacement for the cybernetic part you lost—namely, your eye. This was all done in accordance with the paperwork you signed when initially joining the Arkion Dojo, I assure you; but if you would rather check the legal documents yourself, you can request a copy of all documents pertaining to your enrolment, as well as your injury and subsequent medical procedures from the Arkion Dojo itself. They will gladly oblige any and all requests to double-check everything."

He was downright pleading now for me to understand what was going on, which seemed a bit overly dramatic for a doctor interacting with a patient at first, but then, something he said finally struck me.

'He... He thinks I'm a scion of some super-important family with deep ties to Ether Labs...! That's why he's acting so strange!'

I wasn't exactly sure what level on the corporate ladder Valeria was at, but I was pretty certain she wasn't that high on it, to have me be considered a scion of anything; really. The whole situation was quite perplexing, but I wasn't going to be the one to break the truth to the doctor.

After all, maybe I could even use this innocent misunderstanding to my advantage somehow...?