

Chapter 123 - Final Preparations

Opening up the Skill Selection interface, I took a quick look at what was available.

[----- Skill Selection -----]

Replace any of your existing Skills with available options from the pool.

Available Skills in Pool:

- [Drawing]
- [Tracking]
- [Sword & Shield]
- [Boxing]
- [Poison] Level 0 - 500 / 700xp (>Edge/Tech<)
- [Lip-Reading] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (Intellect)
- [Ripping]

'Yeah... *that checks out*,' I thought, scanning through the list again.

There wasn't much new here since the last time I'd poked around this corner of the System, but to be fair, I hadn't exactly gone out of my way to diversify much lately either. Most of my focus had been on improving what I already had or scrambling to stay alive, not finding new Skills or avenues of training.

The only real newcomer was [Ripping], freshly added thanks to that way-too-close encounter with a Ripper that I still hadn't fully unpacked emotionally.

But it made sense: Trauma always made for great skill acquisition.

For the upcoming Operator meeting—and whatever gigs were going to be a part of it, potentially—I already had two specific Skills in mind that I wanted to sub in. Ones that were way more useful in the short term than some of the dead weight I'd been carrying.

[System]: *Are you sure you want to remove and Lock the following Skills: [Climbing], [Tailoring]? Y/N*

'Yup. *Hit it*.' I confirmed without a second thought.

[System]: *[Climbing] and [Tailoring] Skills have been **removed** from User.*

[System]: *[Climbing] and [Tailoring] Skills have been added to list of **Locked** Skills and will be unable to be obtained again until **Unlocked**.*

They were both Level 0 Skills, so removing them had no adverse effects on me whatsoever—which I was very grateful for, to be entirely upfront here—and considering their fields of usage, I wouldn't be getting around to needing either of them for at least a little while.

[Tailoring] was definitely something I intended to come back to, no question.

I had gear to repair, plenty of reasons to pick up Tech XP on the cheap, and no doubt I'd eventually want to stitch together some proper stealth-friendly outfits. But right now? With no materials and no Credits to my name? It was just squatting in my Skill list for the vibes.

[Climbing] was a similar story.

Useful in theory, but I already had [Wall Runner] as a Perk for those "oh shit" moments when I needed to Spider-Man my way out of danger. If I ever needed to do any serious climbing, Level 0 wasn't gonna carry the weight anyway. And while losing the potential passive XP from climbing jobs or spontaneous wall-scaling stunts kinda sucked, I could live with it.

There'd be time to relevel it later—it wasn't exactly a high-difficulty Skill to grind.

No, what I needed right now were two Skills with actual utility. Skills that might just make the difference between impressing an Operator... or dying in a dark alley because I didn't have the right tricks up my sleeve later down the line.

[System]: *[Tracking] and [Lip-Reading] Skills have been **Unlocked**.*

[System]: *[Tracking] and [Lip-Reading] Skills have been **added** to User.*

Both Skills were still stuck at Level 0 for now, obviously, but unlike [Climbing] or [Tailoring], these actually had a decent shot at seeing action in the field—and soon.

[Tracking] would be handy in damn near any outdoor or urban tail job, and [Lip-Reading]?

That one was borderline broken in a surveillance-heavy world like this. Catching conversations from afar, across soundproof glass, during meetings I had no business overhearing? Yes please.

Even if I didn't get them levelled before the Operator meeting itself, just having them on the list meant they'd start passively gathering experience as soon as I did *anything* related to them. And that alone would pay off long-term.

[<-- Skills -->] **30/30**

[Meditation] Level 4 - 300 / 4,000xp (Intuition/Ego)

[First-Aid] Level 2 - 600 / 2,000xp (Intellect/Reflex)

[Throwing] Level 4 - 800 / 4,000xp (Reflex)

[Programming] Level 4 - 3,000 / 4,000xp (Intellect)

[Netrunning] Level 3 - 1,400 / 3,000xp (Intellect)

[Manifestation] Level 2 - 600 / 2,000xp (>Intellect/Intuition/Anima<)

[Cooking] Level 3 - 700 / 3,000xp (>Intuition/Tech<)

[Slicing] Level 1 - 100 / 1,000xp (>Intellect/Reflex<)

[Maid] Level 1 - 900 / 1,000xp (Body/Intuition)

[Stealth] Level 4 - 1,100 / 4,000xp (Edge)

[Athletics] Level 4 - 2,000 / 4,000xp (Body)

[Contortion] Level 2 - 1,700 / 2,000xp (>Body/Reflex<)

[Acrobatics] Level 3 - 1,300 / 3,000xp (Body/Edge)

[Deception] Level 3 - 0 / 3,000xp (>Edge/Ego<)

[Appraise] Level 2 - 400 / 2,000xp (>Intuition/Tech/Intellect<)

[Negotiation] Level 3 - 900 / 3,000xp (>Ego/Intuition<)
[Quick-Hacks] Level 4 - 1,600 / 4,000xp (>Edge/Intellect<)
[Jury-Rigging] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (>Intuition/Tech<)
[Murder] Level 1 - 200 / 1,000xp (>Edge/Ego<)
[Accounting] Level 2 - 300 / 2,000xp (Intellect)
[Medicine] Level 0 - 600 / 700xp (>Intellect/Tech<)
[Martial Arts] Level 3 - 2,700 / 3,000xp (>Body/Reflex/Intuition<)
[CQC] Level 2 - 1,900 / 2,000xp (>Body/Reflex<)
[Intimidation] Level 2 - 400 / 2,000 (>Ego/Edge<)
[Pistols] Level 2 - 0 / 2,000 (Reflex)
[Firearms] Level 1 - 500 / 1,000 (Reflex/Intellect)
[Lip-Reading] Level 0 - 200 / 700xp (Intellect)
[Tracking] Level 0 - 0 / 700xp (>Intellect/Intuition<)
[[Perform]] Level 3 - 200 / 3,000xp (>Reflex/Intuition/Ego<)
[{Anima Razor}] Level 1 - 700 / 1,000xp (>Anima</Reflex/Intuition/Edge/Ego)

'Yeah... That looks about right,' I thought, giving my Skill list one last check. Nothing wildly impressive yet, but it was finally starting to take shape.

Like a rough draft of who I was trying to become.

Still didn't feel like enough. Not for the level of crap I'd managed to pull into orbit around me.

'If only "slow and steady" was actually an option,' I thought bitterly, closing the interface.

But no, I'd burned that bridge the second I got involved in the whole Jade/Sapphira/Ruby situation. Calling in Vega's favor had bought me some breathing room in that exact moment, but that little stunt had also moved up all of my plans by several weeks, if not months.

And now? The Operator meeting was set. Locked in. Ticking closer with every second, like some kind of countdown to either salvation or getting myself absolutely shredded.

So yeah. The only option left was simple: Be ready.

I adjusted the Cyberdeck back onto my lap, hands hovering over the neural link to connect with it—just about to dive back into the DDE—when a thought popped up, hitting me square in the back of the brain.

"Oh... right."

Something important. Something I'd almost forgotten—again.

"Should definitely slather myself in the stuff properly this time..." I muttered, reaching for the teal-colored tub Miss K had handed out.

I scooped up a generous glob and made sure to really work it into the two spots I'd skipped earlier—left calf and right shoulder—gritting my teeth as I rubbed it in.

Muscle fibers protested with every motion, but hey, everyone knew that if you missed a dose, you just took double next time and it all balanced out, *right?*

With the burn dulled slightly and my skin thoroughly medicated, I let out a relieved sigh and jacked back into the DDE.

Holographic panels flared to life around me, the familiar digital workspace snapping into view. Kill Joy's obnoxiously long list of review notes and flaming-hot criticism scrolled across one of the displays, still titled "*Girly's First Code Review*."

"Alright... where to even start..." I mumbled, scanning the wall of notes and shaking my head.

Sure, Kill Joy had been nice enough—well, *Kill Joy* levels of nice—to sort the notes by impact versus time investment. But that only worked if you were aiming to make the quick-hack as *good* as possible.

I wasn't. Not yet.

This version wasn't for actual field use. It was for *showmanship*.

I needed something impressive. Something flashy.

Something that made a netrunner's jaw drop—or at the very least, raised an eyebrow.

So if Kill Joy thought improving the RAM-to-propagation efficiency should be my first step, because it was relatively straightforward to do so? Yeah, no.

That was getting bumped down the list.

Same for the stuff about modularizing the stealth-layer entry points.

Interesting? Sure. Important? Also yes.

But visually exciting? Not even close.

So instead, I started reshuffling the list.

Prioritizing stuff that made the hack *look* cleaner on paper, hit harder on first use, and had just enough stealthy under-the-hood work to earn bonus points from anyone with a clue.

Ten minutes later, I had my own version of the "Most Worthwhile Fixes" list, fine-tuned to serve *my* goals, working off of Kill Joy's time estimates to make sure that I wasn't going to burden myself with a workload that was completely impossible for me to achieve.

"Yeah, that's more like it," I muttered, flicking the updated list to the center display and giving myself a quick nod of approval.

Then I cracked my knuckles, rolled my sore shoulders, and settled in deep.

"Time to get back to work..."

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About an hour in, I heard Gabriel start shuffling around on the other side of the divider—morning routine kicking off—which marked my first real break in what had become a full-blown coding marathon.

I still had a bit of time before the meeting, but that window was shrinking fast. Every second was slipping through my fingers in a blur of syntax, debugging, and patchwork upgrades.

So far, I'd managed to clean up a few of the worst messes in the code—specifically the ones Kill Joy had flagged with a deeply concerned, “??????????? What???” followed by a link to his *own* Spike code.

You know, the *exact same* one I had already torn apart and jammed into my quick-hack like some kind of data-spattered lunatic.

Turns out, he'd already solved the exact problem I'd struggled with... except, you know, elegantly.

Would've been nice if that had been a one-off, but nah.

The count was up to six—no, seven—of those by now.

And I had a strong feeling I hadn't hit the bottom of the pit just yet.

But honestly? The fixes were solid.

Fast, clean, and didn't require a full rebuild.

Plugging them in made the code run smoother, and more importantly, made it *look* like it had been written by someone who actually knew what they were doing.

At least at a glance.

If some netrunner decided to poke around later, they might not immediately peg me as a clueless blank by doing this.

That alone was worth it.

I'd given myself two hours, max, for this pass—just to clean up the worst offenders.

Basically, anywhere [Programming Maestro] had saved my ass by brute-forcing a workaround so ugly it made my soul flinch every time I looked at it.

That Perk was a miracle worker, no doubt, but it didn't have *standards*.

It just made sure the code *functioned*. Whether that function came through clear logic or some eldritch horror of spaghetti and duct tape? It didn't care.

But I cared. Especially when there was an easy way to remedy the issue.

Because if someone like Kill Joy—aka. somebody that knew their shit—ever saw this version? I didn't want another paragraph of "what the actual fuck is any of this" stapled to a review.

The final three hours were earmarked for the real meat of the project: Making the program actually *look* good—from a netrunner's perspective, anyway.

Which meant one thing, really: Impact.

Not the flashy, over-the-top kind that made someone's HUD glitch out in neon rainbows or scream "*YOU'VE BEEN HACKED*" in bold red letters.

No, this was about the other kind of quick-hacking flash: *Subtlety*.

Especially for stealth-type quick-hacks like this one, the last thing you wanted was for your signature to be obvious. Kill Joy had hammered that point home in his review too, highlighting all the ways my current setup left too clear a trail.

I'd basically stamped my name on the payload like a proud first-year hacker.

Which, okay, wasn't *wrong*, but still.

So the plan was to build in random delays, insert some noise, and stagger the cascading failures. If every sequence always hit the same targets—arms first, legs second, brain-fizz third—then a decent netrunner could pick up on the pattern and firewall off sections of their systems the moment they realized they'd been tapped.

But if the propagation seemed *random*, and the kill-switch didn't fire in a predictable order?

That'd slow their reaction time. Maybe not enough to stop them completely, but enough to make their counter-hack clumsier.

Less clean. More panicked.

And panic was my friend—as long as it wasn't me who was panicking.

Top-tier netrunners would still spot the seams, of course.

The really paranoid ones might even have a kill-switch baked into their own ICE to segment their entire cybernetic makeup the second anything foreign touched them.

But the point wasn't to make something unbeatable—it was to make it hard enough to beat that by the time they realized what was happening, the damage was already done, or in order to defer any further damage, you had to make serious sacrifices.

That was the real difference between good quick-hack design and great design: Not just building something that *worked*, but something that worked *even when someone was actively trying to shut it down*.

My freshly minted Level 4 in both [Programming] and [Quick-Hacks] was already proving to be worth its weight in gold as well.

The whole process had sped up like crazy—especially inside the DDE, where typing with nothing but brainwaves still felt just a little too sci-fi to be real. But I'd finally started getting used to the dissonance, though, and the increased skill levels made everything smoother.

Beyond just the raw speed boost, the knowledge that came with those level-ups had paid serious dividends too.

I wasn't just tackling the big, glaring "please delete this" monstrosities that Kill Joy had flagged—I was cleaning up the code around them on-the-fly as well, smoothing out janky logic, dead-end loops, and weird edge cases that [Programming Maestro] had let slide because, technically, it *worked*.

Ugly as sin, of course, but it worked.

In total, I'd shaved off about 0.18 from the Storage requirement already.

Which, okay, didn't sound like a whole lot on paper, but considering the quick-hack had started out bloated at around 3.55? That was nothing to sneeze at.

Especially for only an hour of actual cleanup.

And that wasn't even factoring in the real goal here: Polish. Presentation.

Making this mess look like a properly thought-out, borderline-sleek piece of netrunner craft instead of what it actually was—a stitched-together cyber-frankenstein.

The whole Storage reduction was literally just a side-effect. A benefit gained from just writing better code, not because I was actually focusing on reducing the size.

I stretched a bit, but made sure to keep out of sight and keep quiet so as not to make Gabe aware that I was awake—I really didn't have the time to talk to him today, even for just a few minutes.

I was in full crunch mode here.

Still... I owed him a proper sit-down. A real one.

There was a mountain of stuff I hadn't asked him yet—about the family, our situation, or even just the old me. The kind of conversation that might matter, down the line.

I'd make time. Just... not today.

The stretch actually ended up helping more than I thought it would, the tightness in my shoulders and back easing just enough to get me ready for another round.

I marked a full hour as a good checkpoint for future breaks, filed it under the "let's see how long this holds before I inevitably try to stretch it too far and suffer for it" plan, and dove back in.

Time to get back to work, *again*...

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“Haaa...” I let out a long, dragging sigh as I stretched—and immediately winced for the third time that morning. My muscles were practically screaming bloody murder at me, stiff and cramping all over the place.

Five hours had passed. That’s how long I’d just spent inside the DDE this morning, neck-deep in code.

And now, finally, mercifully, the end of the programming marathon was here.

The quick-hack still needed work—hell, *loads* of work—but I’d hit the end of my allotted time window. There was no more wiggle room to keep tweaking or polishing.

Not if I wanted to be functional by the time the Operator meeting rolled around.

As I stretched once more, my vision still showed the DDE interface layered over everything—only my motor functions were decoupled. I used the moment to skim over my latest changes, mid-stretch, mentally reviewing the work I’d done like I was critiquing a meal I’d just cooked.

A lot of spaghetti code had been un-spaghettied.

Logic had been cleaned. Redundancies squashed. It felt... *satisfying*.

‘*Yeah. This is looking a **lot** better,*’ I had to admit, a tired smirk tugging at the corner of my lips.

Those five hours? Easily some of the most productive I’d ever had.

And while I would’ve loved to puff my chest out and claim full credit, the truth was that Kill Joy’s absurdly detailed review shard had done most of the heavy lifting in terms of direction.

Without that, I’d have probably fixed a couple bugs and maybe swapped some variable names from “asdf” to “dataPoint1” and called it a day.

Instead, I’d managed to cleanly implement everything I’d prioritized.

Kill Joy’s time estimates had been spot-on too, which helped me stay on target like a woman possessed. The final result? Code that was no longer a monstrosity stitched together by duct tape and vibes.

It was officially, comfortably *use-ready*—at least for the purpose of presentation.

And the cherry on top? The compiled program was now sitting at 2.74 Storage, down from 3.55. That was a fat 22.6% size reduction. Just as a side-product from cleaning up logic and reducing junk.

Massive win.

But more than the numbers, the actual *functionality* had improved in all the ways that mattered.

The propagation protocol had been pushed further up the runtime chain, meaning it would spread faster across systems before triggering the kill routine. A lot of the logic behind how it selected which cybernetic subsystems to mess with had been refined too—prioritizing large-cap I/O pathways and nerve-connection sockets over less critical modules early.

That meant the quick-hack was going to feel nastier without being *visibly* nastier.

Stealthier, in its own awful way.

Granted, it came with a trade-off.

I'd sacrificed a *tiny* bit of stealth—maybe 5%, tops—for a speed boost of 20% or more in execution time. But that was a trade I'd take every time, especially if my audience was a netrunner.

Fast hacks were king.

Unless your slow hack came with a punch that could knock out a city grid, nobody was waiting ten seconds for it to fire.

With my stretches finally done and my brain running clear again, I reconnected the motor systems and dived back into the DDE one last time.

Just one final thing left: Compilation.

[Compiling and Packaging of "New Quick-Hack v2" completed. Would you like to rename it?]

Ah, there it was.

I *wasn't* about to show up to the Operator meeting with a quick-hack named "New Quick-Hack v2."

A girl has *standards*, low as they might be.

I confirmed the prompt and leaned back, humming to myself as I tried to come up with something fitting.

"Hmm... It's a propagating version of Spike, but quieter. Less of a one-hit KO, more like a full-system virus. Hits harder across the board, but doesn't melt any single part on impact..."

I tapped my chin.

"Spread... Surge... No... Leech? Nah..."

Naming was the *worst* part of every project.

"Hmm... Something sleek. Quiet. *Dangerous*. Spreads fast, bites hard, doesn't draw attention until it's too late..."

I mulled it over, rolling the vibe of the quick-hack around in my head like a piece of candy I couldn't quite identify the flavor of.

Then it hit me—simple, sharp, and right on theme.

"Venombite," I muttered under my breath, the name forming with a weird sort of finality.

"Yeah... quiet, precise, and it'll rip your system to shreds if you don't see it coming or have the perfect antidote ready to go."

I typed it in.

[Enter new name: Venombite]

[Confirm new name as "Venombite"? Y/N]

I hit confirm without hesitation.

The DDE pulsed faintly as it registered the change, the new name locking into place with a satisfying click in my brain.

That was it.

My very first *real* quick-hack—cleaned up, repackaged, and properly christened.

"Venombite," I repeated with a tired grin, letting the name settle on my tongue like the aftertaste of a good shot—sharp, satisfying, and with a burn that lingered.

"Let's hope you leave a mark."

It wasn't perfect yet—far from it.

Still needed polishing, a full pass or two to clean up the rest of the mess and optimize it properly. But for now? I was honestly proud of it. Considering where I'd started and how badly time had been slipping through my fingers, I'd pulled it together better than expected.

Kill Joy's code review shard had been a godsend. No doubt about that.

Without it, I'd have been fumbling in the dark and likely handing over a half-baked mess to whoever was waiting on the other side of this Operator meeting. It hadn't made up for all the time I'd lost thanks to Valir's unhinged entrance into my life, but it had salvaged enough to put me somewhat back on track.

Maybe not *ahead* of schedule, but definitely not super far behind anymore.

As if to slap a period on that thought, my cerebral interface pinged—clean, crisp, and right on cue.

["Meet me at the Downpour in 20 minutes. I will take you to the meeting myself." - Vega]

I blinked.

'*Seriously?*'

He'd said he'd reach out at this time, but I didn't think he'd be *this* literal. Like down-to-the-second, punctual.

The guy might've looked casual in that first meeting, but apparently he was running on full military-grade scheduling. I'd been banking on him being fashionably late so I could scramble through the rest of my prep... but nope.

Time's up.

I vaulted out of bed, my sore legs protesting with every step as I grabbed the new Operator outfit Misha had crafted as a replacement for my old one after the Valir-incident—sleek, clean-cut, perfectly tailored, and thankfully free of any bullet holes or bloodstains.

The RaZ clicked into place at the small of my back.

I checked the RI-05 knives next—still sharpened from my initial [Sharpen] use; still extremely deadly. Good.

Backpack, secured. Drone, packed.

MOD-IK, safely tucked into its case and stashed alongside everything else.

I had quickly double-checked that *Venombite* was locked and loaded into quick-access memory—pre-configured, no pop-ups, no last-minute fiddling.

Just ready to use, like a proper quick-hack should be.

One more stop in the bathroom to splash water on my face, check the mirror, adjust a few strands of hair.

“Yeah... Passable,” I said to my reflection. No glam, no glitter.

Just clean lines, alert eyes, and a brain packed to the brim with knowledge. I wasn't here to be pretty. I was here to prove something.

One last flick through my Skill list—everything in order. Nothing missing. I exhaled.

Then, finally, I stepped up to the apartment door.

Deep breath. Calm in. Stress out.

I pushed the door open and stepped into the hallway.

No more delays. No more preparation. No more options or changes.

Time for the Operator meeting...