

Chapter 169 - Smooth Progress

It took me about an hour of staring at the ceiling, rolling from one side of the bed to the other, and mentally arguing with myself before I finally landed on anything resembling a conclusion about the [First-Aid] Perk.

By the end of it, my eyes were—semi-firmly—set on [Vital Sense].

‘Alright. Double-check your logic, Sera,’ I warned myself. ‘Don’t pick something just because it feels right. That’s how you end up with garbage Perks and lifelong regret.’

So I ran through it all again, checking and re-checking my arguments for and against each Perk available.

The easiest one to toss out right away was [Double Sling].

Its limitations alone made that decision for me.

“Your own size and weight” just wasn’t a great benchmark for most people right now.

Sure, I was definitely heavier than I looked thanks to Body stacking dense muscle like it was going out of style, and Reflex compressing everything into something efficient and terrifying—but the wording still sucked.

‘Is that volumetric size? Height? Mass? Some weird System interpretation of “presence” or whatever?’ I’d thought with a frown. *‘Because if it’s height, this Perk is basically dead on arrival—and I’m not gambling a Perk slot on a “maybe”.’*

Next up was [Expert Voice].

Useful, sure. Potentially very useful. Remote applications of [Negotiation], [Deception], and [Intimidation] during emergency situations was nothing to scoff at.

The fact that it worked on enemies, as well as allies, was the major selling point for it.

But... not for me. Not right now.

I wasn’t exactly a known diplomancer, and I wasn’t running with a stable crew that could really capitalize on it either. If I had a team I worked with consistently? *Maybe*.

But at this stage, it felt like buying furniture for an apartment I didn’t live in yet.

Which left the hard part: [Bleed Break], [Improvised Gear] and [Vital Sense].

All three were good. Like really good. And all three came with trade-offs that made my head hurt to try and evaluate against each other.

‘[Improvised Gear] is the easiest one to argue away,’ I eventually decided. *‘I’m going to buy a proper first-aid kit and a trauma kit soon anyway. Once I have those, the Perk loses a lot of its edge.’*

The synergy with [Jury-Rigging] was undeniably tempting, though.

'Yeah, training two Skills at once would be very efficient,' I admitted. 'But "XP-efficient" isn't the same thing as "right choice". Perk slots are limited. I can't afford to burn one just because it feels clever.'

Still... *Damn*, it was hard to let go of the idea of double-dipping on experience.

But I probably had to, all things considered.

Then there was the elephant in the room with [Bleed Break].

The one that refused to leave my thoughts.

'I guess watching your brother almost die—what, more than once?—from massive hemorrhaging will do that to you,' I thought grimly. 'Not to mention my own run-ins with excessive loss of life-fueling liquid recently...'

The use cases were very obvious.

Stopping arterial bleeding with nothing but pressure. Not being locked in place while doing it. Being able to *move*, to walk yourself—or someone else—out of danger and get to a Ripper or Slicer on your own terms?

That was *insanely* strong.

Add in the potential synergy with [Serenity]—

'Apply pressure, meditate for a minute, bleeding fixed forever...'

—and it started to feel downright unfair.

And the Perk didn't even specify *whose* bleeding it applied to.

It could be mine, a teammate's, a random civilian's or even an enemy's. Specifically the enemy one would add some serious bite to [Intimidation] in the right circumstances.

Solo or crew didn't matter either.

It was effectively *universally* useful, which made it a sure-fire "no-brainer" Perk to consider as a fallback, if nothing else. Which was *exactly* why I was hesitating.

Because as good as [Bleed Break] was... it only really shined when things had *already* gone catastrophically wrong.

And I still wasn't sure I wanted to plan my future around that kind of thinking.

While some emergency "get out of jail free cards" were, of course, extremely valuable and something I'd absolutely not do without—given the whole "*if I die, I'm fucking dead*" thing that real life came with—doing so for every single Perk would also not get me anywhere.

Not to mention that I was almost certainly going to pick up a proper trauma kit in the very near future anyway, which immediately knocked some of [Bleed Break]'s appeal down a few pegs.

A lot of what it offered just stopped feeling as critical once I factored that in.

Which, inevitably, dragged my thoughts right back to [Vital Sense].

'The downsides are pretty obvious,' I thought, cupping my chin as I stared at nothing in particular on the ceiling. 'The information it gives is heavily limited. Knowing whether someone is stable, spiking, or crashing isn't all that useful most of the time.'

I paused for a second, then amended it.

'But knowing the general form and severity of the main injury? That's very, very useful.'

The upsides were quite a lot easier to pin down.

*'Just touching a person,' I continued internally. 'Slapping them, grabbing their arm, shaking their hand—anything in between—and getting that read instantly... That's **really** good.'*

Normally, I would've ranked [Vital Sense] lower than [Bleed Break] without much hesitation, at least when it came to Perks I wanted for myself right now.

On paper, [Bleed Break] still felt more straightforward, more obviously “medical.”

But that was the advantage of having time to actually think things through instead of rushing the decision.

With a first-aid kit and a trauma kit sitting firmly at the top of my to-buy list, and the recent dojo session with Miss K once again hammering home just *how* lacking I truly still was in close-quarters situations—if I couldn't just bulldoze my way through without sheer Attributes—the picture started to shift.

Having something that could function as both a medical tool and a combat-adjacent tool at the same time...

That was pretty much exactly what I needed right now.

'And that's not even touching the diplomancer angle,' I added mentally, lips twitching slightly. 'Being able to casually call out an injury someone's desperately trying to hide? Or catching something they thought no one noticed? That could open doors that would otherwise stay locked tight.'

I mulled over the pros and cons for a few more minutes, turning them over one last time, until it finally felt like I'd squeezed the decision dry.

“Alright, I got it,” I muttered, settling on [Vital Sense] as my inaugural [First-Aid] Perk. “First things first, though...”

I opened the System Interface, selected [First-Aid], and initiated the Knowledge and Muscle Memory download for Level 3 [First-Aid].

The download rolled in less than a heartbeat later—and it didn't bother pretending to be gentle.

Where Level 2 had felt like a crash course in not screwing things up, this felt like an additional six months worth of drills, repetition, and pattern recognition being slammed straight into my head.

"Stable," for one, stopped being a vague comfort word I had heard in TV-dramas and movies before, but instead turned into a checklist that my brain ran automatically.

First and foremost, Stable apparently *didn't* mean "*fine*"—as I had assumed until now.

It simply meant "*controlled*." Airway clear, breathing adequate, circulation holding—for now.

It meant injuries that weren't *actively* worsening, bleeding that was contained, vitals that stayed within predictable bounds. Someone stable could still be in serious trouble, but they weren't about to tip over the edge if I took my hands off them for ten seconds.

"Spiking" was where things got ugly—that one held true to TV-dramas from my past life.

I learned to recognize the subtle tells—the way pulse pressure tightened, how skin temperature shifted unevenly, the almost imperceptible changes in breathing rhythm that signaled the body was compensating too hard, too fast.

Spiking meant active deterioration had started, even if it hadn't necessarily fully announced itself yet. Internal bleeding ramping up. Shock creeping in. Pain responses overwhelming regulation.

It was the stage where hesitation would inevitably kill people, and the System drilled that into me with scenario after scenario, forcing the muscles in my hands and arms to move before my thoughts could lag behind.

Then, finally, there was "crashing."

That one came with a kind of cold finality.

Crashing wasn't as much of a trend as it was a countdown.

Blood pressure collapsing. Mental status dropping off a cliff. Organs failing in sequence and knowing which one would go next mattered more than anything.

I could feel my hands acting it out—rolling someone onto their side without thinking, clearing an airway, applying pressure hard enough to hurt, knowing exactly when pain stopped mattering.

The muscle memory was the scariest part.

My fingers moved with confidence I hadn't earned yet, performing assessments in seconds instead of minutes. Checking capillary refill without looking. Reading skin tone and moisture like text. Knowing how long I could afford to wait before someone went from spiking to crashing—and how little margin there really was.

The System then ran me through scenario after scenario—dark rooms, rain-soaked streets, cramped corridors, active combat zones—forcing my reactions to stay clean even as conditions deteriorated.

Every mistake shown to me was corrected instantly, every hesitation my mental-self portrayed punished with worsening outcomes until the lesson stuck.

And then, finally, it all wound down with one last, lingering lesson: [First-Aid] was never a one-and-done solution. It was a continuous process. A constant back and forth of checks, validations, and actions, all aimed at keeping things moving in the right direction.

It wasn't simply about slapping on a tourniquet and calling it a day, but about tightening it, loosening it, reassessing circulation, reapplying stabilizers when the body started to slip again. Stepping in directly the moment a patient showed signs of tipping toward a spike—or even worse, a crash.

It was vigilance. Relentless, oftentimes straight-up *exhausting* vigilance.

A loop that didn't end until the patient was either fully out of danger or handed off to higher-level care.

That was what [First-Aid] was really about, as I'd just learned.

I lay there at the tail end of the download for a few moments, staring blankly and just focusing on breathing, letting my pulse settle back into something normal.

'Some of these downloads are seriously intense, even at the lower levels...' I couldn't help but think. 'But yeah, that tracks. Anything medicine-related was always going to be like this, I guess. Doctors spend literal years—sometimes decades—learning this stuff. Of course the System isn't going to go easy on it.'

Honestly, it checked out.

[First-Aid] was also one of those Skills I clearly remembered being extremely front-loaded back in the game. The early levels dumped a disproportionate amount of capabilities on you, and now I understood why.

There was only so much knowledge you actually needed to provide proper first aid—but the problem was that you needed to know it precisely and effectively immediately from the get-go. Messing it up didn't just mean inefficiency like with most other things but making things quite literally worse, potentially even killing someone.

So yeah, the first-year equivalent of learning [First-Aid] being one of the toughest downloads, both knowledge-wise and in terms of muscle memory, made complete sense.

After taking one last steadying breath, I opened the System Interface again and selected the Perk.

[System]: *Do you want to spend 1x [First-Aid] Perk Point to acquire [Vital Sense] Perk?* Y/N

With that round of decisions finally done, I all but launched myself off the bed that had doubled as my mental prison for the past few hours and shuffled out into the living room.

I polished off some of the ramen I'd picked up earlier from Mr. Shori's—still sitting at that perfect temperature thanks to whatever miracle-tech those containers used—then headed back to my room. I flung myself onto the bed once again out of pure habit, reached for my deck, and let it boot up in my hands.

'Alright,' I thought, exhaling slowly. 'Time to get [Venombite] fixed up.'

Opening the development environment for the first time in a while felt... weird.

A little stiff. Like flexing muscles that hadn't been used in quite a while.

But after a few moments of poking around, the familiarity came rushing back, pathways reconnecting, instincts slotting neatly into place.

And honestly? I was more than a little excited to be back in it.

"First time I'm coding anything with [Programming Maestro] and [Debugging] both unlocked," I said aloud, grinning as I stared into the digital void. "I'm expecting great things here, System. Don't let me down. I burned a whole [General Perk Point] on this combo, so it better be the fucking bees knees, you hear me?!"

I plopped down into the chair, settled in, and put on some low-volume music to get myself in the right headspace. With that, I pulled up Kill Joy's notes on [Venombite], opened the source code for my inaugural quick-hack, and started typing...

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Around three hours later, I got unceremoniously yanked out of my flow-state by an incoming message.

["Don't got nothin' at the moment, but one of the people I sometimes run with has a gig lined up for tomorrow. Same place I brought ya last time. Goes by Higgins, he'll be wantin' a netrunner, but nothin' super experienced. Should be up yer alley."] – Cryo

There was a small info package attached to it, mostly just backing up what Cryo had already said, but with the important bits nailed down—location, contact, and an exact meet time. Around 4:30 p.m.

The initial flash of irritation at being ripped out of my programming groove faded fast, replaced by a sharp spike of interest... and a little excitement.

Another potential Operator gig, lined up this effortlessly and this quickly?

Yeah, I could live with that.

‘Trading that favour with Vega for Cryo’s connection is already paying off heavily, huh?’ I thought, a smug little smile creeping onto my face before I could stop it.

I checked the time out of habit. Almost midnight.

Normally, that would’ve been my cue to call it a night, but I didn’t actually need sleep right now—especially with my Bonus Experience still sitting comfortably thanks to the truly irresponsible amount of Rest Function abuse I’d indulged in after the recent apartment mayhem.

So I shot Cryo a quick thanks and slid right back into the code.

And honestly... [Programming Maestro] paired with [Debugging] was an absolute menace of a combo that was hard to put down.

In just three hours of working on [Venombite], I’d probably made more progress than I had in ten hours before unlocking the second half of the puzzle with that [General Perk Point].

The difference was night and day.

It was wild to never have to *hunt* for errors anymore—just looking at the code and knowing *exactly* where things were breaking, why they were breaking, and how ugly the fix was going to be.

No more “Error in line 256” in a code that was 210 lines long.

And even when I didn’t immediately see the clean solution, [Programming Maestro] made sure I was never *stuck*. I could always brute-force a workaround, reshape logic, or reroute functionality until it worked.

Fixing the absolute mess that had been the original [Venombite] source code turned into something... efficient, controlled and *extremely* fun.

Short of dumping it in someone else’s lap—or handing it off to some terrifyingly advanced AI—I honestly couldn’t imagine this getting much better.

...Even though I *knew* it could get much, much better still.

‘There are still plenty of Perks out there that could push this even further,’ I thought, fingers still moving as the code scrolled by. *‘And a whole pile of Levels in the relevant Skills to go with them.’*

A grin tugged at my lips.

‘How do they say it again...? Ah, yeah: This isn’t even my final form!’

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Around ten hours later, I finally managed to tear myself out of the DDE—and, as had become tradition after my longer coding marathons, I immediately hated myself for still being alive.

The transition was always the worst part.

Going from perfectly still, mentally sprinting at full speed, to suddenly being very aware of a physical body again was absolute hell. Every muscle protested its existence the moment I so much as shifted, like my body was personally offended that I expected it to work after that.

“Ugghh...” I groaned, staring at the ceiling. “But... yeah. Worth it.”

And it *really* had been.

I’d burned through a pretty sizable chunk of Kill Joy’s feedback on [Venombite], on top of just generally cleaning up the code in ways I genuinely wouldn’t have thought possible in such a short amount of time. Refactors, logic tightening, removing redundancy I hadn’t even realized was there—it all just *clicked*.

Just tonight alone, I’d managed to shrink [Venombite]’s storage requirement from its old 2.74 down to a frankly hilarious 1.98.

Considering the MOD-IK v4 topped out at 4 storage, that meant I could now legitimately load [Venombite] onto my deck *twice*.

Not that doing so would actually accomplish anything—RAM and HEAT were still the real limiting factors for multi-use—but it was still worth appreciating. More importantly though, it meant I could comfortably load both [Shield] and [Data-Blade] alongside it.

Which was pretty damn relevant, considering tomorrow’s—no, today’s now—potential netrunner gig with Higgins.

Arguably, [Data-Blade] didn’t do much in the real world, all things considered. Outside of Cyberspace, it was mostly useful for carving into badly secured networks or poking at lazy defenses.

[Shield], on the other hand, was the real gain. Being able to potentially block incoming quick-hacks could *very* easily be the difference between walking away annoyed and getting my brain microwaved.

Depending on what that gig turned into, the storage reduction alone might end up being extremely clutch.

And then there was the *other* upside.

[Venombite] was now small enough to fit onto the blip-shard Mouse had handed me at the end of the last job with Cryo. The same shard he’d offered to pay me a truly ridiculous amount of Credits for—just so he could indulge his very specific fetish of getting absolutely *grilled* by it.

‘Which, honestly... I’m not gonna yuck his yum,’ I thought with a lazy shrug. ‘He’s paying me in cold, hard, digital cash.’

I snorted softly to myself as another thought came unbidden, *‘Not like we all didn’t draw **that** type of furry art or do some equally questionable commissions during our broke creative phase just to make rent. Pretending this is somehow different would be downright hypocritical, no...?’*

Either way, I had a blip to load.

First, I ran the blip-shard through its inherent verification first, just to be safe.

Not because I actually expected Mouse to mess with it—but paranoia was a survival trait I definitely intended to nurture. Thankfully, all of Kill Joy’s public-facing code systems came with their own self-verification routines baked in, the kind I seriously doubted anyone else on the planet could punch through without tripping every alarm imaginable.

Everything came back clean.

Satisfied, I slotted the shard into my deck and loaded [Venombite] onto it, watching the progress tick up as the code settled in. I set the usage to three charges, just like we’d agreed, then waited for the deck to finish its work. A soft chime signaled completion, and I pulled the shard free, placing it neatly alongside my Operator gear for later today.

‘I should be able to just drop it off at the OPN and let them handle the handoff to Mouse,’ I thought. ‘No real reason to wait to do this face-to-face. Who knows when we’ll even cross paths again...’

With that taken care of, I stretched—properly this time—arms overhead, spine cracking in a way that felt *earned*.

For once, it actually felt like things were moving forward instead of sideways.

[Martial Arts] and the Arkion Dojo were coming along nicely. I’d finally locked in my [First-Aid] Perk. Another Operator gig was already lined up. And my coding and netrunner Skills? Those were clearly leveling up in a very real way.

All the little pieces were starting to click.

‘Tutorial’s over, Sera,’ I thought, a smirk tugging at my lips. ‘This is the real game now.’

I pulled up the System Notifications and cleared them out, making room for whatever the new day was about to throw at me.

[System]: *The following Skills have gained experience: [Programming], [Quick-Hacks], [Manifestation]*

[System]: *Skill gain **Highlights:***

[System]: *[Programming] Skill is 500xp away from reaching Level 5.*

[System]: *[Quick-Hacks] Skill is 400xp away from reaching Level 5.*

[System]: *The following Attributes have gained experience: Intellect, Intuition, Edge, Anima (+ Bonus XP)*

[System]: *Remaining Bonus XP Available: 2200.*

“Not bad... not bad at all...” I muttered, taking a few slow, deliberate breaths as I worked on cycling the last bits of staleness out of my body.

It was a new day, which meant doing things properly.

The usual workout routine came first—nothing fancy, just enough to wake everything up and remind my muscles they still belonged to me. After that, a long shower to wash off the lingering fatigue and reset my head. Then a stop by Mr. Shori’s, as tradition demanded.

And after that—something different for once.

Shopping.

I still needed to round out the last few pieces of my Operator setup for today’s gig—markedly, a first-aid and a trauma kit, most of all...