

Chapter 122 - Administrative Tasks

I stood there awkwardly for a few minutes as Kill Joy's digital alter-ego scribbled away, adding more and more lines to an already ridiculously long parchment.

It felt like he was going for some kind of historical record or something.

*'Alright, old man, I get it. My code's garbage—no need to twist the knife **this** hard,'* I grumbled internally, though honestly, I didn't really mean it.

Getting direct feedback from someone who was basically the god of programming was *exactly* what I needed.

Opportunities like this were absurdly rare, especially given Kill Joy's infamous temperament among the playerbase. Spamming him with code reviews was a one-way ticket to getting permanently locked out of the shard; making it useless for anything but resale.

Not exactly something I could afford right now.

But finally, after a total of about ten excruciatingly slow minutes, Kill Joy let out an overly dramatic sigh—complete with throwing his head back and rolling his shoulders as if he had just done some seriously hard work—that was clearly meant to be heard. “As expected, this looks like it was written by a blank with barely half a brain. Frankly, I'm astonished it even runs, given the... well, given everything about it, really.”

I rolled my eyes at that, hard enough they probably threatened to pop out of my skull.

“Anyway,” he continued, extending the parchment towards me, “here's a quick rundown of your most obvious and glaring errors. Didn't want to overload that underdeveloped brain of yours on your very first review, girl.”

But the moment I touched the parchment, two things happened simultaneously.

First, the scroll instantly unraveled and hit the floor, rolling out cartoonishly across the classroom, turning corners, climbing walls, and eventually even covering the ceiling. Kill Joy had clearly spent way too much time on this particular bit of theatrics.

Second, a Cerebral Interface prompt popped into my vision:

[Kill Joy (SPG-01) wants to transfer a file titled “Girly's first code review.” Do you want to accept this transfer? Y/N]

I confirmed the prompt immediately—albeit with yet another eye-roll—annoyed at both the ridiculously childish filename and the completely unnecessary visual drama unfolding around me.

Kill Joy just sat back down on his cushioned chair, hands behind his head, legs kicked up on the desk, and shot me the smuggest, most self-satisfied grin I'd ever seen. His chuckling as he watched the parchment snake all over the room really wasn't helping my mood either.

Taking a deep breath to keep my composure—my freshly upgraded Ego definitely earning its keep—I forced a polite smile onto my face and dipped into a respectful little bow.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Joy. I genuinely appreciate you taking time out of your undoubtedly thoroughly busy schedule to give me this feedback. I'll make sure to apply every bit of advice you've given me—both now, and in any future projects. I promise, my next quick-hack will be leagues above this one, so please look forward to it.”

Kill Joy immediately snorted, waving my words away like I was some irritating gnat buzzing around his head.

“Psssh, as if, girl,” he scoffed dismissively. “Me, looking forward to reviewing the ramen-code disasters of a blank like yourself? Ha! That would only happen if you managed to create something actually impressive or worthwhile for once, girl.”

But before I could fully process the words, he added, “But, I suppose... If by some *miracle* you manage to throw together more quick-hacks with a hint of non-blank creativity like this one, as if that would even be possible considering this once-in-a-lifetime fluke, I *might* be able to be convinced to take a quick look...”

My eyes widened at that.

That was an open invitation, wasn't it? He was practically straight-up offering future code reviews, provided I could keep up this level of innovation, right?!

Kill Joy immediately caught my reaction and backpedaled hard, flustered. “Not—not that I actually want to review your code or anything, girl! Don't get any weird ideas! I do this purely out of pity, a charitable service from my benevolent self, because without my generous guidance, a hopeless blank like you would be completely lost, got it?!”

“Yes, absolutely, Mr. Joy. Of course, Mr. Joy,” I replied solemnly, adding another respectful bow while desperately struggling to keep my face straight.

‘Don't think about how tsundere that just sounded. Don't think about how incredibly tsundere he just sounded. Do NOT laugh,’ I frantically repeated inside my head, chanting it like a mantra to stop myself from collapsing into uncontrollable giggles right then and there.

“I'll head out now and start going through your notes to improve the quick-hack. Thank you again, Mr. Joy. This is seriously invaluable advice,” I said, giving him one last deep bow—this time actually meaning it.

Kill Joy just waved me off again, practically shooing me away like I was interrupting his precious day, and with that, I disconnected from the classroom and dropped straight back into my DDE, still biting back a laugh...

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“Damn... this is way more extensive than I thought it'd be,” I muttered quietly, still scrolling through the massive file Kill Joy had dumped on me about half an hour earlier.

Turned out, that ridiculous cartoon parchment wasn't just a cheap gag after all.

The file was *huge*—and meticulously detailed.

Honestly, it felt like I'd hit the absolute jackpot; it was basically a gold mine filled to the brim with in-depth [Programming] and [Quick-Hack] knowledge I'd never expected to get my hands on at this stage of my development.

I tried searching for a downside just to keep myself grounded, but there really wasn't one—other than the sheer impossibility of incorporating even as little as five percent of these improvements into my quick-hack before the Operator meeting.

But naturally, being a bona-fide Transcendent, Kill Joy had anticipated exactly that scenario, clearly assuming the time crunch was partly to blame for my sloppy code.

In the notes, he'd thoughtfully included two perfectly organized lists: One ranking changes from most important to least important, and another—*far* more practical for my current situation—detailing the changes that would yield the highest impact relative to the amount of time invested.

It was genuinely above and beyond anything I could've hoped for.

Apparently, creating something intriguing enough with the help of [Programming Maestro] and [Spiritus Machina] had convinced Kill Joy it was worth going the extra mile, even for a total rookie like me.

'*Thanks, Kill Joy,*' I silently repeated to myself, feeling oddly grateful towards the egotistical digital persona within the SPG-01 shard. A strange feeling for sure, to be grateful to what was basically a glorified AI chatbot, but undeniably genuine.

But there was still another factor left—something else that would help push my quick-hack even further before time ran out: System experience drops.

Now that I'd officially completed, compiled, and even successfully tested the quick-hack on a target, the System recognized it as a finished project, granting me my first significant experience rewards in both [Programming] and [Quick-Hacks] since I had gained the Skills.

I'd heard the notification pings earlier, but I'd been far too engrossed in picking apart Kill Joy's extensive feedback to actually check them at the time. With my initial curiosity about his notes satisfied, though, it was time to take a quick look and see exactly *how much* experience this completed project had netted me.

Mentally flicking through my interface, I navigated eagerly to my pending notifications and threw them open, heart beating a little faster with anticipation.

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

[System]: 3,500xp (+1,000xp *First Time Creation [Type: Quick-Hack] Bonus*) gained for [Programming] Skill. (*Project Completion Bonus*)

[System]: *[Programming] Skill has reached Level 4. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download available.*

[System]: *800xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.*

[System]: *2,400xp (+1,000xp **First Time Creation [Type: Offense] Bonus**) gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill. (**Project Completion Bonus**)*

[System]: *[Quick-Hacks] Skill has reached Level 4. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download available.*

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

[System]: *600xp gained for Intellect.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Edge.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Intuition.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Anima.*

“Sweet fucking baby Jesus on a bike! Holy shit!” I blurted out as the massive experience drop flooded my vision, my eyes nearly popping out of my skull.

I'd expected a solid experience gain—sure—but this? This was *beyond* absurd.

My heart immediately kicked into high gear, pounding so fast that my Ego actually had to step in and forcefully dial things back, bringing my pulse down to a manageable tempo just to keep me from hyperventilating.

It wasn't just that this single experience drop was ridiculously large.

These weren't exactly beginner-tier Skills, either.

Both [Programming] and [Quick-Hacks] had been at Level 3 already, which meant each experience point was significantly harder to earn. But somehow, the Project Completion Bonuses had stacked with the First Time Creation [Type] Bonuses, multiplying my rewards to absolutely absurd levels.

My head started spinning, and I had to actually sit down—right there, inside my own DDE—just to steady myself; it was *that* wild.

“That's fucking insane...” I murmured, repeating it several more times while I waited for my body and brain to catch up to reality.

The Project Completion Bonus was obvious, but I'd completely forgotten about the First Time Creation [Type] Bonus that existed for certain crafting-oriented Skills.

Some Skills, like [Cooking], didn't even get this bonus as they had less-specific and smaller, albeit more numerous First Time Bonuses, but clearly, [Programming] and [Quick-Hacks] *did* have this specific type instead.

Basically, the System gave a juicy bonus the first time you created a distinctly new type of product within a crafting-related Skill. For [Programming], it meant bonuses for your first Quick-Hack, your first universal app, your first semi-AI, and so on.

And for [Quick-Hacks], it rewarded creating your first offensive, defensive, utility, or support hack—plus certain subcategories, if they were different enough.

What I'd completely missed, though, was the fact that these bonuses stacked with the Project Completion Bonuses.

It was a jackpot scenario, plain and simple.

Disconnecting from the DDE to immediately take advantage of this windfall, I found myself back in the real world, hunched awkwardly over my cyberdeck, with my back leaning painfully against the wall.

Moving even a little bit felt like absolute torture—every muscle screamed in protest—but I forced myself into a slightly less terrible position to brace for the incoming Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download.

As I shifted my legs, I discovered—with a sharp, electric jolt of pain—that I'd apparently missed a couple spots when applying Miss K's teal-tub ointment earlier.

My left calf and right shoulder muscles burned like fire every time I moved, feeling dangerously close to snapping entirely.

“Ouch, ouch, fuck—ouch!” I hissed through gritted teeth, wincing and blinking back tears as I slowly worked through the worst of the stiffness.

Gabriel's soft snoring still drifted from behind the metal divider, which meant I still had a few precious hours left before shit got real again.

After several agonizing minutes of stretching, swearing under my breath, and just generally hating life, I finally settled into a more suitable position to receive the System's downloads.

‘Alright, here we go,’ I thought, mentally bracing myself. *‘Give me something good, System. Don't let me down now.’*

With that, I took a deep breath and confirmed the Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download for [Programming] Level 4.

The moment I confirmed the download, my head immediately erupted in that familiar, overwhelming sensation as the System began force-feeding knowledge and muscle memory straight into my brain.

Level 3 had been intense enough—like cramming an entire year's worth of university programming classes straight into my skull—but this was something else entirely.

It was like jumping into the second year of an intensive university degree, complete with all the complex algorithms, intricate data structures, and advanced system design theory that came with it.

My mind reeled briefly as information flooded my thoughts, rapidly organizing itself into neatly structured categories.

I could immediately recognize a major jump in sophistication.

Concepts that had previously felt hazy or half-formed suddenly clicked into crystal-clear understanding: Advanced database optimization methods—things like indexing strategies and normalization—snapped neatly into place, showing me efficient ways to handle data on a massive scale without letting it grind my programs to a crawl.

Multi-threading and concurrency became intuitive, outlining ways to squeeze every last drop of efficiency out of my code, taking advantage of parallel processing to avoid bottlenecks.

Then came a detailed, vivid understanding of something even more intriguing: Basic adaptive algorithms.

These weren't the simple, static sets of instructions I'd learned about before; these programs could analyze their environment and adjust their behavior in real-time, shifting strategies mid-operation. Stuff like genetic algorithms and machine-learning basics flashed through my mind—still beginner-level compared to what the really high-end coders were working with, but literal *leagues* beyond anything I'd ever imagined tackling myself at this stage—or any stage, really. I had never been a programmer in my previous life, after all.

Slowly, the intense wave of knowledge settled, leaving my head spinning slightly as I took a deep, shaky breath. I centered myself, letting my newly acquired understanding gradually slot itself neatly into my memory.

'*Alright,*' I thought after a few minutes, steadying myself again, '*time to go two-for-two.*'

I knew from experience that doing two back-to-back downloads like this, especially the higher level ones, wasn't exactly smart or productive. But I didn't have the luxury of time on my side to take it easy on this one, so I simply had to bite the bullet here.

Bracing once more, I navigated to the notifications and punched in the confirmation for the Level 4 [Quick-Hacks] download.

Immediately, the download flooded into my mind, and my vision blurred for a moment as the System crammed the equivalent of a year two's worth of highly specialized quick-hack knowledge directly into my brain.

Unlike traditional hacking, quick-hacking wasn't about patient infiltration or subtle social engineering—it was brutal, flashy, and rapid-fire, the digital equivalent of a smash-and-grab.

My head spun with vivid insights into how to bypass more sophisticated ICE protections at breakneck speeds, exploiting tiny loopholes in even the most secure digital architectures.

I also felt my understanding of payload optimization leap forward significantly, showing me exactly how to compress powerful hacking routines into smaller, lighter packages, maximizing their potency without eating up precious RAM or overheating my deck.

System-level manipulations like short-circuiting sensory implants to cause immediate disorientation, or hijacking reflex boosters to send enemies staggering, now clicked naturally into place as well.

The download even delved a bit deeper into sophisticated propagation techniques, showing me advanced strategies for chaining attacks seamlessly—jumping from one cybernetic implant to the next mid-combat, causing cascading failures before the target even realized they'd been compromised.

Exactly the kind of knowledge I had been looking for, for my current project!

Furthermore, concepts like “buffer flooding” and “signal spoofing” now also felt downright intuitive to add, as did more aggressive forms of attack such as forcing hardware overloads or initiating emergency shutdown protocols.

Gradually, the mental storm receded after a few moments that felt like hours, and I took another deep, shaking breath, steadying myself as the overwhelming surge of data finally settled into neatly organized chunks of knowledge and instinct.

“Holy shit,” I muttered breathlessly, shaking my head to clear the last lingering fog and try to get the piercing headache that had made itself known as a result of the back-to-back downloads to disappear.

Having both of the downloads combined like this was, while painful, definitely the way to go, I realised.

A lot of the ideas from the [Programming] download had helped settle some of the [Quick-Hacks] ones into place more easily, while some of the latter's also helped me piece together some of the parts of the [Programming] one too.

‘Synergistic benefit there, no doubt,’ I thought as I held my head in both of my hands, breathing slowly and deeply to try and clear the splitting headache. *‘Really wish the System would stop wrecking my head like this though...’*

While I was already cleaning house on the System-front, however, there were two more things that needed to be taken care of.

Things that hopefully wouldn't cause my head to explode.

The first thing was to take a look at the [Deception] Perks that had opened up with me spending my hard-earned [\[General Skill Point\]](#) on it.

Opening the Perks menu, I took a quick look at the options.

[Tengu Voice] (Deception 3)

Wait, you didn't give this order...?! - Gain the ability of voice mimicry, capturing and reproducing any voice you have previously heard with perfect detail, including verbal ticks, accents, and inflections.

[Double Life] (Deception 3)

Clark Kent? Never heard of the guy. - Gain the ability to seamlessly maintain up to two distinct identities, ensuring they remain unlinked by others unless you deliberately reveal their connection or are caught transitioning between them.

[Cover Story] (Deception 3)

*Huh...? I guess that **does** sound reasonable, yeah.* - Gain the ability to automatically concoct plausible alibis that hold up under low to moderate scrutiny. The effectiveness of your alibis is based on the knowledge level of the Skill.

[Misdirection] (Deception 3)

Wh...What?! How...?! - Gain the ability to create a false narrative with your movements at will, briefly making it seem like parts of your body are moving in one direction, while actually moving in another entirely. Any onlookers and enemies that fail to beat the Skill's knowledge level check are fooled by this deception.

[Liar Game] (Deception 3)

It was all a lie? Everything...? - Gain the ability to increase the number of successes on any lying attempts by one, regardless of the initial outcome. This bonus may exceed the usual maximum number of successes.

My breath caught sharply as I read through each of the perks.

'Shit...' My excitement rapidly cooled into frustration as reality sank in.

My first instinct—my absolute gut reaction—was to pick [Liar Game] immediately, without any hesitation.

A flat, unconditional +1 bonus to the number of successes was just insanely good from a pure power-gaming perspective.

Skills like [Deception], [Negotiation], and all the rest of those "diplomancer" style abilities revolved around a "degree of success" system rather than a simple binary pass/fail.

You'd essentially roll your skill against your target's difficulty check (DC), often multiple times depending on various factors like your expertise, relationship with the person, and so forth.

For instance, if you wanted to deceive someone convincingly, you'd typically need at least one or two successes against easy marks—people with no real reason to doubt you or lower skill levels. But if the target was naturally skeptical or particularly skilled at seeing through deception, you'd probably need three or four successes to truly sell your story.

[Liar Game] wasn't just good; it was outright broken in the right hands.

The perk even allowed you to exceed the usual limits of believability, potentially unlocking special dialogue options or additional bonuses that otherwise wouldn't be achievable.

The inner min-maxer in me practically screamed in agony, desperately clawing at the back of my skull urging me, *begging* me to pick it.

'But I just can't afford to go for raw power right now,' I thought, sighing heavily.

Yeah, [Liar Game] was incredibly tempting, but right at this moment, raw strength wasn't the issue.

Survival and security were.

Same went for [Tengu Voice]—especially given my [Polyglot] Trait—which felt tailor-made for a master linguist playthrough.

Powerful, enticing and infinitely scalable, yet ultimately not solving the immediate threats facing me.

Instead, the perks that actually promised to keep me safe were [Cover Story] and [Double Life].

With how limited my social experience had been in my last life, I'd been struggling way more than I liked to admit with all the weirdly layered conversations and subtle manipulation games I'd been thrown into lately—despite the System's best attempts to shove the necessary context into my brain.

And yeah, it *had* helped, but I was still *me* underneath it all. Still figuring it all out.

[Cover Story] was definitely tempting.

It was a panic button, a hard reset on any slip-up I made when it came to lying my way through a situation. That kind of automatic fallback? Honestly gold this early in the game.

I was low-level, low-experience, and juggling more than a few things I really had no business being involved in yet. Being able to snap my fingers and retroactively create a believable story to cover my tracks? That was the dream, really.

Especially when I was still building up the instinct to lie like it was second nature.

But [Double Life]?

[Double Life] wasn't just a good perk. It was *exactly* what I needed.

It gave structure to the separation I'd been trying to maintain between "Sera" and "Ela," making that mental and social split real enough to fool people even if they were already looking for overlap.

According to the description, if I played it right, even someone like Valeria wouldn't be able to connect the dots—so long as I kept the personas distinct and avoided being seen in both roles by the same people.

And yeah, maybe she already knew. It was possible. Maybe even likely.

But on the off-chance she didn't?

Then this could be my one and only shot at keeping the two lives apart.

That alone made it the only choice. Because if Valir came after "Ela"? Fine.

That was already a mess I had to deal with already; no way around that.

But if she came for “Sera”? If she started sniffing around Mr. Stirling’s work or Miss K’s dojo—or gods forbid, the damn apartment Gabe and I lived in?

I’d be screwed six ways to Sunday. There’d be no safe place left for me to stand.

So as much as it hurt to pass on [Liar Game] and its disgustingly good flat bonus to social rolls—or [Tengu Voice], which would’ve scaled beautifully with my [Polyglot] Trait—I knew what I had to do.

[System]: *Do you want to spend 1x [Deception] Perk Point to acquire [Double Life] Perk?*
Y/N

I confirmed the selection after one last, heavy sigh and let the System do its thing—*nothing*.

As always, of course, the Perk selection didn’t actually end up doing anything.

I had still braced myself in anticipation of something happening, but as with all the other Perk selections, I didn’t feel a thing when it went into effect—it was downright freaky how I couldn’t even tell if it was in effect at all, really.

‘*Alright, almost done now,*’ I told myself, before turning towards the last administration task before I could return to the DDE: Replacing some long-overdue Skills...