

Chapter 25 - Unravelling Plot

After a solid session of sneaky sprinting through the corridors of the 43rd floor, I returned to the apartment looking like I'd taken a dive into a pool of sweat.

But hey, no pain, no gain, right?

I couldn't resist a quick peek at the day's progress, and the numbers that flashed up on my interface brought a triumphant grin to my face. The combination of stealthy jogging had definitely paid off, the XP tally ticking up in a way that made every drop of sweat worth it.

In my previous life, I definitely would not have lasted even ten minutes, but the consistent chime of notifications was a level of crack-cocaine that my gamer brain could not resist. It made these grind sessions surprisingly tolerable.

[System]: *500xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *200xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.*

[System]: *400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 400xp.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

The numbers ticking up on my interface were like music to my ears, or, well, eyes.

At this rate, I was on track to hit some major milestones with my [Athletics] and [Stealth] Skills by tomorrow morning's run, not to mention finally reaching the coveted Body 3 during my pre-dawn workout.

With Body 3 in my sights, I figured I could even up the ante on my runs going forward. Instead of lengthening my jog through the 43rd floor's hallways—which, let's be honest, could get mind-numbingly dull, even with the constant dopamine rush of experience drops—I planned to ramp up the intensity. Thirty to forty-five minutes of high-octane, heart-pounding exercise seemed a lot more appealing than a never-ending marathon.

Edge was trailing a bit, sure, but it wasn't too shabby either, perched comfortably at 900 out of the 1000 XP needed for level 2. That meant another win was waiting for me on tomorrow's run!

The thought of it all—the coordinated levelling, the synchrony of Skill and Attribute upgrades—it was like a gamer's dream. Like turning in a bunch of quests all at once and watching your experience bar zoom upward.

A quadruple hit of that sweet, sweet dopamine in just one hour of effort? Now that was my kind of high. That was the stuff of RPG legends and gamer lucid dreams, and yet here I was, living it in real life!

Upon my return, I was surprised to see Oliver already at home, earlier than his usual time.

"Hey, Oliver! Back so soon?" I called out as I strolled by. He was absorbed in something, judging by the blue light emanating from his eye implants, a telltale sign of something being displayed within his cerebral interface.

This 'feature', if one might call it that, only went away with some higher-tech or specifically designed implants, so it was easy to know whether someone was paying attention, or just reading through their favourite Neo Avalis newsletter in any conversation.

He jerked upright, clearly caught off guard, which in turn gave me a start.

"Oh, Sera! Didn't see you there. Welcome back," he replied, shaking off the surprise. "Work's been a bit of a nightmare, to be honest. Remember the hacking debacle I mentioned a couple days ago? We thought we had it under control, but it turns out we were just at the tip of the iceberg..."

He paused, a frown etching deeper lines on his face. "A corpo netrunner sent to fix the mess got taken down by a daemon still lurking in our systems. So now, not only do we still have the daemon issue, but there's also the matter of a corpo casualty on our premises."

He sighed, the weight of his words heavy in the air. "It's a complete mess. But at least working from home means I can keep an eye on you and Gabe," he finished, a heavy trace of meaning lining his tone.

As I absorbed his words, I couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for Oliver's string of bad luck. *'When it rains, it really pours, huh?'* I thought. *'First, I go missing and turn up basically dead and in a coma, then his work gets hacked, followed by Gabriel nearly getting killed if it wasn't for my timely miracle recovery and now he has corpos on his ass... Oliver's definitely got more than his fair share on his plate.'* It made me even more determined to pull my weight and then some, especially now that I was back in action.

Regrettably, my skills in the netrunning department were barely nascent—my [Netrunning] Skill was freshly unlocked, not even scratching Level 1. Taking on daemons capable of deep-frying seasoned corpo netrunners was way out of my league. Even if, by some miracle, I managed to defeat one, I'd hardly know the first thing about extracting useful data from its digital carcass.

Wanting to offer Oliver some semblance of comfort nevertheless, I hurried to fetch the last box of Mr. Shori's culinary delights. Setting it down next to him, I hoped the gesture would at least provide a brief respite from the storm clouds gathering over his head.

"Here, take a break and have some of this," I suggested, laying on my best therapeutic tone. All those sessions from my previous life had to be good for something, right? "You're already swamped with this stuff all day. Try to snatch some moments of peace, okay?"

I couldn't help but brighten as I added, "Oh, and guess what? I helped make this! I've been lending a hand at Mr. Shori's stall down on floor 16. It's been awesome for getting back on my feet, and the bonus is all the tasty grub I can eat!"

My thumbs-up might have been a tad over-the-top, but if it could nudge a smile onto Oliver's face, it'd be worth the theatrics.

Oliver's eyebrows shot up in surprise at my revelation. "You're helping out at a food stall? And cooking? That's... unexpected," he said, his tone a mixture of bemusement and

curiosity. "You've only just started moving around again, and now you've landed a gig like this? I'm impressed, but also a bit surprised. Cooking was never really on your radar before."

I shrugged, adopting an air of casual mystery. "Well, you know, post-coma life has me looking at things differently. I guess I'm just interested in... well, *everything* now," I said, slightly exaggerating my newfound zest for life. I was hoping this fresh enthusiasm of mine would be as infectious for Oliver as it had been for Gabriel.

Oliver chuckled, a hint of the weight lifting from his shoulders. "Seems like you're making the most of your second chance, Sera. Alright, I'll take your advice and try to relax a bit. You're definitely on the money about this whole '*dealing with it all day*' part." He conceded, opening the food box and beginning to eat. His appetite seemed to kick in as soon as he took the first bite, a sign that maybe he was letting go of the work stress, even if just for a moment.

Seeing him finally take a break, I excused myself. "I'm going to grab a shower," I announced, feeling the stickiness of my earlier exertions. It was time to wash off the day's sweat and gear up for whatever came next.

—

The rest of the day unfolded with an unexpected quietness, a rare lull in the usually eventful rhythm of my life.

I took advantage of the downtime to delve into the SGP-01 data-shard's virtual realm for about an hour, a foray that yielded modest but welcome boosts in my [Programming] and [Netrunning] Skills.

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

[System]: *100xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.*

[System]: *200xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

Beyond that little digital excursion, the day passed without any significant developments or surprises.

Gabriel, deep in the throes of healing sleep, was gearing up for his return to work the next day. Oliver, meanwhile, was submerged in his own sea of corporate troubles.

This quiet evening, I decided, was not such a bad thing. It gave me the perfect excuse to hit the hay early, something I'd been secretly yearning for.

The Rest Function was a marvel for wiping away physical fatigue and easing some of the mental strain, but today had stretched me thin in ways I hadn't expected. A part of me was craving just to be, to exist without the constant push for progress or survival.

Heeding my own advice to Oliver, I chose to spend an hour in blissful idleness, a rare luxury in my new life. Since waking up in this world, it had been a non-stop hustle of experience grinding and adapting to my new reality.

But tonight, I allowed myself the simple pleasure of unwinding, of soaking in the quiet mundanity of megabuilding life.

With nothing on my agenda but relaxation, I lounged, letting the stillness of the apartment wash over me. It wasn't much—just the hum of the building and the distant sounds of life beyond my walls—but it was enough.

When the time came to retire for the night, I was acutely aware that tomorrow would likely ramp up the intensity again. But for now, I revelled in the calm for a few more, precious minutes as I slowly navigated my cerebral interface.

Setting the Rest Function for a solid eight hours, I took a deep, contented breath, embracing this moment of peace before mentally flicking the confirmation button.

—

My eyes fluttered open immediately, the usual post-rest confusion hitting me at full force once again.

[System]: *Rest completed. Time rested: 08:00:00*

[System]: *600 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

As my confusion from waking up ebbed away, Gabriel's grunts from the other side of the room were hard to miss. The guy was in obvious discomfort, yet stubbornly set on heading to work.

"You sure you're good?" I called out, concern lining my voice. The thought of him straining himself so soon after his brush with death had me on edge.

His reply came between huffs of discomfort. "Yeah, I'm fine! Just wrestling with my pants here. Stitches make it... interesting. Keep doing your thing, I'll manage!" The frustration in his voice painted a clear picture of his struggle.

I could almost see him trying to shimmy into his pants, the belt buckle taunting his fresh stitches. *'That must be a real pain. Hope he can handle the day...'* I thought, anxiety nibbling at the edges of my mind.

His rush to return to work, barely two days after the incident, was understandable, especially given his boss's 'generous' offer. Double shifts as compensation still sounded harsh to me, but in a twisted way, it was a blessing compared to the ruthless work culture more prominently featured in cyberpunk worlds.

Or, now that it came up, my old world.

'Man, the old "sick but still gotta work" routine. Feels like cyberpunk fiction was less of a warning and more of a guide book for the corrupt politicians and lizard-people CEO's back then...' It was eerie how my past reality had started mirroring the bleak narratives of the cyberpunk genre, almost as if the power-hungry elites had missed the entire point of the genre.

In a way, this familiarity made adapting to life in Neon Dragons a tad easier.

For all its flaws, at least here the basics like healthcare didn't come with a crippling price tag, as far as I knew. It was a small silver lining in a world that, in many ways, mirrored the grim realities I had known before.

Taking Gabriel's advice, I geared up for the day, opting for the same workout clothes I'd worn the day before. Thankfully, the wardrobe's built-in auto-cleaners had worked their magic, making them feel fresh as new. It dawned on me why Sera's wardrobe had been so limited; with the ability to refresh clothes overnight, the need for a vast array wasn't pressing.

While the selection wasn't quite hefty enough for my liking, the convenience of always having clean clothes was a definite perk. I made a mental note to appreciate the small things.

Once dressed, I peeked in to ensure Gabriel had managed the pants situation, then slipped past him into the living room. It was a bit surreal, stepping out before him for the first time, but this was the new normal—me, on the fast track to... well, everything.

But I had to pump the brakes for now. I was tantalisingly close to hitting Body 3, just 200xp away, and I didn't want to reach that milestone in full view of Gabriel. While I doubted the change would be as dramatic as before—I was, after all, only really levelling from "slightly below average" to "fully human"—it wasn't a spectacle I wanted to stage.

So, I parked myself on the couch and flicked on the TV, a placeholder activity while I waited for Gabriel to depart. It was a strange feeling, this waiting game, but it was a small price to pay for maintaining the element of secrecy regarding my whole System-laden existence in this world.

The early morning news on Neo Avalis was usually a humdrum affair, but today, it held my attention with a startling headline.

"We continue with our breaking news segment," the polished TV host began, his voice tinged with a rehearsed solemnity. "The Sobirashu Corporation has just confirmed the passing of Professor Matsuiro Kobayashi in today's morning hours. Renowned for his groundbreaking work, Professor Kobayashi died unexpectedly in his sleep. Sobirashu's official statement cites a catastrophic malfunction with his cerebral interface, ironically a recent innovation from the very R&D department he led for over two decades."

His co-host, Mira, chimed in with a perfectly modulated tone of sympathy. "It's a poignant reminder of life's unpredictability, Nix. Professor Kobayashi devoted his life to advancing technology, only to be felled by his own creation. A poetic end, yet heartbreakingly tragic."

"Indeed, Mira. A life dedicated to innovation, tragically cut short by—"

I snapped the TV off, unable to stomach the saccharine, scripted sympathies any longer. My mind was already racing down a tumultuous path.

*'Matsuiro Kobayashi, **dead**? That can't be right!' I thought, struggling to reconcile this news with what I knew. 'He's a pivotal character in Neon Dragons! His death now throws the whole storyline off course. It's more than six years too early! Without him, what happens to the AV.ATAR project? Who could possibly fill his shoes?'*

The questions spiralled, each more unsettling than the last.

Could my mere presence in this world have set off such a drastic alteration in the timeline?

Was everything I knew about the Neon Dragons storyline destined to become irrelevant, rendered useless by these unforeseen, ripple-like changes? The real conundrum was figuring out how my existence could have *possibly* influenced such a significant event.

I had *hardly* been a force of nature since waking from my coma. In fact, I had just ventured outside my apartment for the first time barely two days ago.

How could I have possibly impacted *anything* to this extent?

As I mulled over these questions, I couldn't help but verbalise my thoughts internally, trying to piece together a plausible explanation. *'Could the Matsuiro Kobayashi in the game have been an imposter? Maybe the real one died today, and the one in Neon Dragons was a clone or something?'*

It was a far-fetched idea, and I quickly dismissed it. *'No, that doesn't add up. If that were true, it would've been all over the game's wiki. There's no way the lore masters would miss such a crucial plot twist...'*

So, what was left? Had my arrival in this world somehow, however indirectly, led to the professor's death? The very thought seemed ludicrous, yet I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was amiss.

A chilling thought struck me, sending a cold shiver down my spine.

'The only significant thing I've done since venturing out was delivering that data-shard to Vega...' My eyes widened as the implication dawned on me.

Could it be possible that the shard I delivered to Vega held information that somehow led to Professor Kobayashi's demise? The fate of that shard would have been entirely different had I not shown up at Mr. Shori's stall.

But then, logic began to seep in, tempering my wild speculations.

'How would that even make sense? A small-time gang like the Clawed Beasts going head-to-head with THE Sobirashu Corporation? That's like a microbe picking a fight with a star destroyer. No matter what was on that shard, it's hard to believe they'd take such a suicidal leap; much less succeed. And how on earth would Mr. Shori have access to something so critical to begin with?'

As I pieced together these thoughts, my racing heart began to slow. It seemed increasingly unlikely that my actions, or Vega's, were tied to the professor's death. But that left the big question hanging in the air: What really happened to Professor Kobayashi, and why?

It was something I was likely not going to get any answers to for a while, but the realisation that the story and world had already changed to such a drastic degree, was deeply unsettling—regardless of whether my existence itself had caused this change or not.

Gabriel's entrance into the living room was a welcome interruption to my spiralling thoughts.

"Heading out, Sera. Remember, don't do anything I wouldn't," he said, flashing his familiar grin. But I noticed a hint of reluctance in his posture, a lingering uncertainty that was understandable given recent events.

'You heard it, Sera: Time to cheer up Gabe and get him ready for the day,' I mentally geared up for a bit of sibling cheerleading.

"You got it, Gabe! And hey, don't forget that combat knife. Remember, you're a giant compared to those punks! If anyone tries anything, just show 'em who's boss. I don't want to have to come down there and whoop their asses for you!" My words were a mix of jest and genuine concern, hoping to lighten his mood.

"You're such a blank..." Gabriel rolled his eyes, but I caught a hint of relaxation in his posture—score one for sisterly pep talk. "Sure thing, sis. Don't wait up for dinner, I might be late. Gotta square things away with Mr. Schultze as quickly as I can. Debt's like a shadow, better to outrun it when you can," he replied with a sigh, then stepped out, leaving me to my own plans.

With a clap of my hands, I sprang up from the couch. "Time to get moving!"

I headed to my designated workout corner, the only relatively tidy spot in the apartment, and assumed my usual starting stance for the first set. But then, an errant thought struck me. *'Hold on, wouldn't it be smarter to start with some stretching? Loosen up those muscles first.'*

It seemed like a good way to prep for the workout ahead.

While the Rest Function did wonders in ensuring I woke up without any muscle aches or soreness, I realised it wouldn't be much help in the middle of the day. The last thing I wanted was to have to hit the pause button on my activities because of a muscle strain or similar mishap.

'Maybe adding a bit of pre-workout stretching to my routine wouldn't be such a bad idea,' I pondered, picturing the potential downtime a pulled muscle could cause. *'Six to eight hours of recovery would mean losing valuable time I could use to gain experience.'*

With this newfound resolution, I stood up and began a series of upper body stretches. I methodically worked through each muscle group, ensuring they were adequately warmed up, before moving on to do the same for my lower body.

Just as I was getting into the groove, ready to launch into my workout proper, a notification chime from the System caught me off guard. 'Did stretching just earn me some Reflex or Body experience?' I wondered, momentarily puzzled.

But when I checked my System Notifications, I was met with a delightful surprise. It wasn't Reflex or Body experience at all that I had gained.

[System]: *[Contortion] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.*

The notification had me puzzled. 'Does this mean my stretching technique is off? Or could it be that there's no specific [Stretching] Skill, so the G.E.M.A. System categorised my attempt as [Contortion]?' This unexpected turn left me slightly bemused and admittedly a bit concerned about my stretching form.

I mentally bookmarked the need to find proper stretching tutorials. If my attempts were being interpreted as contortion, I might need to *seriously* reassess my technique.

However, as far as I remembered, neither [Contortion] nor [Stretching] were skills in the original Neon Dragons game, which added to my uncertainty. *'Looks like I'll need to level this [Contortion] Skill up to the first rank just to get a basic understanding of what it's all about.'*

For the time being, I decided to incorporate this newfound [Contortion] Skill into my morning routine, at least until I figured out whether I was stretching correctly or not and could replace this slot with proper stretches in the future.

In any case, a new Skill meant new avenues for gaining experience and unlocking more Perks. Despite the confusion, it was an opportunity I couldn't exactly pass up.

'More Skills, more gains,' I reminded myself, shaking off the initial surprise and getting ready to dive into my morning workout...

—

My decision to wait for Gabriel's departure before diving into my workout was soon validated by the triumphant chime of the System in my ears, heralding a significant milestone.

[System]: *200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 900xp.*

[System]: *Body Attribute has reached 3.*

As soon as the notification sounded, I could feel the G.E.M.A. System kicking into gear.

There was an almost tangible shift in my body as my muscles and overall physique underwent a subtle yet profound transformation. It was like receiving a general renovation, with each part being fine-tuned and enhanced under the System's meticulous care.

As the changes wrought by the G.E.M.A. System took effect, I could sense the subtle yet significant alterations in my body. Unlike the previous upgrades to my Body Attribute, this time, the change didn't feel as dramatic in terms of structure. It was more like a final piece of a puzzle clicking into place, solidifying and enhancing what was already there.

The transformation felt akin to a bucket being gradually filled over time—first with large stones at Body 1, adding mass and weight, then with smaller gravel at Body 2, providing more detail and definition. Now, at Body 3, it was as if fine sand was poured in, filling every tiny crevice, smoothing out the rough edges, and fortifying the whole structure.

This advancement didn't so much expand my physical capabilities with new heights as it cemented and refined my existing strengths. It was like reinforcing a tool to manufacturing standards—every movement felt more precise, every action more assured, more powerful.

This wasn't about gaining new ways to use my body, like Body 0, 1 and 2 had been, but rather about enhancing and perfecting the ways I already knew—and it felt fucking amazing.

Midway through my set, the G.E.M.A. System's enhancements kicked in, and the difference in my strength was nothing short of remarkable.

Before, managing about eight push-ups in a set was my limit, but now I felt like I could easily hit 20, maybe even push it to 25.

Granted, a lot of this newfound prowess was due to my relatively small and lean frame, meaning I wasn't moving a huge amount of weight, but the improvement was undeniably significant.

The most noticeable enhancement, though, wasn't in terms of raw power; it was my stamina that had taken a major leap forward. Even as my arms tingled with the exertion of the first set, I was far from breathless.

This boost in endurance was probably a result of a couple of factors.

Firstly, achieving Level 1 in [Athletics] had already given my overall stamina a considerable lift. Now, with the Body Attribute reaching level 3, my capacity for sustained physical activity had been further amplified.

This combination was a promising sign for the rest of my workout routine and, indeed, for my overall grinding sessions going forward.

Ultimately, I decided that getting Body to at least 5 was a must-have, considering the dire plans I had made the previous day. If all else failed in my plans to take out the low-life trash that had assaulted my brother, then, at the very least, I'd have to be able to put up a fight with brute force, if necessary.

While a 5 wouldn't make me into the Hulk by any stretch, compared to scavs relying on dead women to ambush somebody 1v3 in order to get a modicum of a chance at success, I might as well be. I would probably be fine with a 3 already, but I wasn't going to take any chances—not when my very life depended on it.

It would likely take a week or two to get there, but it would be worth the grind—in more ways than one.

Body would benefit me throughout most of my other grinds as well, even if it didn't govern the majority of my Skills. As long as a Skill required me to physically move around, Body would always give me some kind of a leg-up on the grind for them, either by making me faster, stronger or even just increasing the time I could spend grinding without tiring out.

Whether it be [Juggling], [Throwing], [Stealth] or, hell, even [Maid], all of them stood to gain from me improving in this area.

In essence, a higher Body level meant I could train harder and longer, maximising my experience gain across the board. It was an efficient way to ensure I got the most out of every hour spent honing my abilities.

So, I kept my Bonus XP exclusively for Body training for the foreseeable future, making that my first and highest priority across the board.

But all these thoughts could wait for later. For now, I had a set to complete and a ramped-up workout to finish to get this day of concerning revelations and exciting milestones truly started...