

Chapter 134 - Drops

I dropped my backpack onto my lap and unzipped it, casually pretending to dig around inside like I was just organizing stuff, even though my real focus was on the System screen hovering quietly in my vision.

'The System's never just spawned a reward into the real world before... but better safe than sorry,' I thought, navigating toward the claim button with one eye on the others in the car.

Last thing I needed was to pop some weird-ass loot bubble mid-transit and have to try and explain *that* away.

Yeah, normally the System kept things pretty contained, but this was a different kind of reward. One I'd never seen before, and I didn't want to risk blowing my cover when I had the perfect excuse to check it now.

Sure, I could wait until I was home, where it'd be completely safe—but with nothing else to do during the ride, it felt like a waste of time not to just go for it.

Based on what Miss K and Shori had told me about Anima in general, I was fairly sure no one here could see what I was doing. Even if they did have access to Anima Sight, they wouldn't keep it active at all times for no reason.

Hell, I wasn't even sure any of them knew what Anima even *was*, let alone how to use it.

Still, I played it smart—quick glance around, made sure no one was watching, then hit the imaginary button.

[System]: *You have claimed 1x [Random Reward (Uncommon Table)]!*

[System]: *Rolling reward from: Uncommon Table... Rolling...*

A shiny D100 materialized right in the center of my vision, spinning in place with way too much flair.

*'Okay, that's a bit **very** extra,'* I thought, blinking at it. *'Why even code it like this...? Whole thing feels like a loot box animation made by someone with too much budget and not enough restraint.'*

The System usually kept things pretty utilitarian, but apparently *loot rolls*, of all things, were where the devs had gotten a little playful. The die started to slow, clacking along like it wanted to build suspense—and then finally stopped.

Seventeen.

'Cool. Seventeen... And that means what exactly—'

[System]: *Outcome: 17. Reward distribution in progress...*

[System]: *You have **gained** 1x [1,000 XP (Body-bound Skill)]!*

I blinked. Then blinked again, reading it twice just to make sure I wasn't misinterpreting it.

*'No shit... That's actually kinda legit? A thousand XP, and I get to pick where it goes... And **when** too? As long as it's Body-bound, anyway.'*

Not bad. Not bad at all.

Just as I'd hoped, nothing manifested in the real world.

No glowing orb, no weird item drop, no visible signs at all.

I zipped up the bag and set it beside me again, ready to use as a makeshift shield if anything suddenly came flying at my face—just in case.

Seeing XP drops as part of loot rolls? That was new—and useful. Could help close the gap on a few of the stubborn Skills I hadn't been able to push past a certain level.

Only problem? When I really thought about it, I didn't actually *have* that many Body-bound Skills to work with. And none of them were particularly *hard* to train, generally speaking.

Thirty total Skills, and only six were tied to Body at all.

Most of those had awkward XP totals, weird breakpoints, or level-caps that made a clean 1,000 XP kinda tricky to slot in perfectly.

'Still gotta check the XP logs anyway... maybe something in there'll help sort it out,' I told myself, flipping over to the backlog of System notifications I'd muted earlier that morning before leaving the apartment.

To call it a flood would've been putting it mildly.

[System]: 1,900xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for Ego.

[System]: 400xp gained for Intuition.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

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

[System]: Operator (Netrunner) defeated.

[System]: 350xp (+200xp) gained for defeating Operator (Netrunner). [First-Kill Bonus Experience]

[System]: 300xp gained for Edge.

[System]: 300xp gained for Intellect.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Tracking] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Deception] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for [CQC] Skill.

[System]: [CQC] Skill has **reached** Level 3. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download **available**. [CQC] **Perk Point obtained**.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

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

[System]: 300xp gained for [Contortion] Skill.

[System]: [Contortion] Skill has **reached** Level 3. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download **available**. [Contortion] **Perk Point obtained**.

[System]: 300xp gained for [{Anima Razor}] Skill.

[System]: [{Anima Razor}] Skill has **reached** Level 2. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download **available**.

[System]: 100xp gained for Anima.

[System]: 400xp gained for Body.

[System]: 400xp gained for Reflex.

[System]: 600xp gained for [Murder] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Ego.

[System]: 200xp gained for Edge.

[System]: Edge Attribute has reached 4. **Upgrade delayed until User confirmation**.

[System]: Scavenger (Low-Tier) defeated. [x3]

[System]: 250xp (+100xp) gained for defeating Scavenger (Low-Tier) [x3]. [**First-Kill Bonus Experience (x1)**]

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

[System]: 1,000xp gained for [Appraise] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Tech.

I was practically reeling from the flood of notifications lighting up my interface—level-ups, downloads, new Perk Point unlocks.

It was a whole damn *avalanche*.

Sure, I'd expected a solid payout from the job, especially after how cleanly we'd wrapped it up, but this? The sheer amount of experience being handed out... it didn't feel real.

We'd blitzed through the scavs, no one on our side had taken any apparent hits, and it had ended so fast it barely even felt like a full op.

Yet here I was, looking at a mountain of rewards like I'd just soloed a boss fight.

Still, as I combed through the notifications one by one, something *did* rub me the wrong way.

'Really, System? You're seriously gonna leave me hanging at 995 out of 1,000 XP on the General Level?' I stared at the number, half-expecting it to magically bump up on its own. *'Couldn't scrounge up five more XP from somewhere? Stingy bastard...'*

I glanced past the overlay, quick check out the window—still on the highway, still cruising, no sudden turns or stops.

'Good,' I nodded.

Gave me enough time to start pre-scouting Perks, even if I knew I wouldn't be locking anything in just yet.

Better to think it over when my brain wasn't still half-sloshed in leftover adrenaline.

First up: [Contortion].

I'd looked at the list before, back when it had first hit Level 1—weeks ago now—but figured it wouldn't hurt to refresh my memory before digging into the more complex stuff that [CQC] was likely to bring.

[Coil Spring] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Cobrastriiiiike! You gain the ability to contort and compress your body in unique ways, significantly enhancing the height and distance of your jumps from a crouched, coiled position.

[Narrow Twist] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Dear god, they're like a fucking slime! You gain the ability to twist and contort your body to slip through the smallest of openings, navigating spaces others would consider utterly impassable.

[Slippery Body] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Nobody can keep you locked down! You gain the ability to wriggle free from nearly any physical restraint or hold actively placed upon you by somebody else.

[Escape Artist] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Houdini would be proud! You gain the ability to escape from most bonds or restraints with ease—only high-tier equipment resists your escape attempts.

My general thoughts on the [Contortion] Perks hadn't shifted much since I first skimmed them all those weeks back, I realized.

'[Coil Spring] still feels like the least immediately useful,' I mused, mentally flicking through the list. *'I've already got [Wall Runner] for vertical movement, and that one's a hell of a lot more consistent. Unless I'm trying to pull off some circus-level nonsense, I don't really see [Coil Spring] getting much mileage.'*

[Narrow Twist], on the other hand, still looked like it could be crazy useful—if the situation called for it. The problem was just that: *if*. I had no clue how often I'd be squeezing through vent shafts or collapsing between tight wall gaps while running from something murderous.

'[Slippery Body] and [Escape Artist] though... those two are real contenders,' I thought, biting my lip. *'Both of them are about getting out of fucked situations. Just depends if it's ropes, chains, or someone trying to bear-hug me into submission.'*

It was a tough call, no doubt. But looking over the list again, there weren't any true duds here—aside from maybe [Coil Spring], and even that wasn't totally useless if I stretched my imagination a bit. Maybe I'd think of a niche use case for it once I had more field time under my belt.

'Still... if I had to choose right now, it'd be between [Slippery Body] and [Escape Artist]. They just seem the most universally useful.' I let the thought settle before nodding to myself. *'But yeah, not deciding right this second. This is something I wanna think through properly—no regrets, no second-guessing later.'*

With that bit settled, I closed the Contortion list and swapped over to [CQC]—first time pulling this one up. I had no expectations, no biases, just pure curiosity and the faint buzz of anticipation building in my gut.

[No-Space Fighter] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Snake-people can do snakey things... You gain the ability to remove all typical penalties from cramped positioning of all close-combat actions in tight spaces such as, crawlways, ducts, lift shafts or when otherwise similarly impeded.

[Snap Sheathe] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Draw, Sheathe, Repeat. Draw, Sheathe, Repeat... You gain the ability to rapidly sheathe/stow and subsequently redraw your weapons in one fluid motion, as long as your upper-body movement isn't impeded.

[Lethal Flow] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

One down... Two... Three... Ten... You gain the ability to immediately follow up a melee kill with a dash, reposition, roll, or vault action without impacting your stance, stamina or situational awareness.

[Kinetic Battery] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

First you get hit a lot, then you hit 'em with a KABOOM! You gain the ability to store a portion of kinetic energy upon successfully parrying heavy attacks that can be spent to power your next melee attack with explosive force.

[Gun-Kata] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Every angle is accounted for. Every bullet has a purpose... You gain the ability to seamlessly transition between strikes and point-blank fire. While within melee range, you can chain firearm discharges directly into melee attacks without delay, even firing from non-standard positions (underarm, off-hand, behind-back, etc.) mid-motion. Enemies struck by a melee hit are momentarily tracked, enabling follow-up shots to auto-correct for movement if fired within one half-second.

I let out a quiet sigh, eyes locked onto the list hovering in front of me.

'Another one of those impossible choices, huh...? Just what I needed today.' I couldn't help but roll my eyes a bit at the situation.

Anyone else probably would've killed for just one of these perks—*any* of them—and here I was, stuck groaning about the “burden” of getting to choose between all of them.

Real Sera problems.

Didn't change the fact, though: This was gonna be a tough pick.

[No-Space Fighter] looked solid—practical, dependable, probably the most straightforward out of the bunch. Nothing fancy, just the ability to not get caught slipping in tight spots.

But in a lineup like this, that kind of utility felt... well, underwhelming.

Like bringing a wrench to a gunfight. Still, definitely had value in specific situations.

[Snap Sheathe] though? Now that one had me actually thinking.

Instant weapon swaps? That was the kind of versatility that opened doors.

'Hell, maybe I could run a proper loadout. Keep a knife out most of the time, then quick-switch to a sword if I need to bring down the hammer on someone.'

The only catch? I needed something *already* in my hand to make it work.

No free draws—just quick exchanges.

Still, in the right hands, that was huge.

Then there was *[Lethal Flow]*—the dream of every highlight reel junkie.

That one read like it was made for people who didn't like stopping for anything. Dodge, roll, stab, shoot—one target to the next, clean, smooth, efficient. *'Might be kinda cracked, if I really lean into this scav-clearing lifestyle... and judging by today, I just might.'*

Between what I'd learned and what I'd felt—how natural it had all come to me—it was hard to argue against it.

[Kinetic Battery], though? That one was straight-up terrifying.

Pure momentum turned into power, stored and redirected.

'I swear, Jin would probably short-circuit if I punched harder than him one day,' I thought with a crooked grin. More than just style, it was practical—something that could help if I ever ran into a tanky 'Borg that didn't go down easy.

That kind of backup plan... It was very hard to ignore.

And then, of course, there was the one I'd been expecting to see from the very start:
[Gun-Kata].

The classic. The staple. The icon.

Every single cyberpunk story had its version of this.

Whether it showed up as a passive, a special move, a skill tree—it *always* existed.

Stylish, deadly, cinematic as hell. And honestly? There was something magnetic about that.

'It's damn near perfect—great scaling, tons of potential, no real weaknesses... other than me not having a gun yet.'

But that wasn't exactly a permanent issue. Or even a long-standing one, if I put my mind to it. Guns were easy to come by if you knew where to look—or knew who to ask.

I could fix that in a moderately quick timeframe.

The real issue? That it was *too* tempting. The fantasy of being *that girl*—the main character with the slick moves, the gun flips, the fluid motion—that was a dream I'd had since I first started digging into all this.

It was the story I'd always wanted to be part of.

But this wasn't a story. Not really. Not a game, where I could simply hit F9 for a reset.

There were no resets. No rollbacks. No "whoops, I picked the wrong perk" do-overs.

This was my real life.

And that meant no snap decisions. No chasing aesthetics at the cost of function.

Not unless I was damn sure it was the right call.

'If I end up with [Gun-Kata] after weighing all my options? Great. But I'm not locking myself in just because it looks cool. Not this time...'

Closing out of the interfaces, delaying the choices until a later date, when I've had some more time to really sit down and puzzle all of it through, I returned my attention to the road outside the window, just letting it pass by me as Cryo continued to take us back, somewhere towards Delta...

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About ten minutes later, we finally veered off the highway again—but this time, we weren't diving back into the undercity maze of rusted tunnels and half-lit alleys. Instead, Cryo drove us through one of the wider surface roads, hovering just above the grit-caked ground layer of the city proper.

A little less oppressive than the usual deep dives, but still packed as hell.

"Where are we even going?" I finally asked, giving up the act of playing mysterious and aloof. I had absolutely zero clue where we were anymore—everything out the window looked vaguely familiar but just off enough to feel disorienting.

"Ya said ya wanted a license," Cryo said, not missing a beat. His eyes never left the road. "So we doin' that. Gonna get ya licensed."

"Oh. Like, *now*?" I blinked.

"OPN offices we frequent," Pina chimed in, lounging in her seat that made me think she never had any sort of safety instructions on being a passenger in a vehicle before. "Place we pick up gigs, blow off steam, grab drinks, snag intel or maybe a blank or two if we're short before a job. That kinda place."

My eyebrows shot up. That... was not at all what I'd expected.

I thought Cryo would drop me back at Delta, maybe tell me he'd shoot me a message when it was time for the next meetup to get me licensed.

But nah. Apparently, Cryo didn't do "later."

Everything with this crew moved fast. No dragging feet, no drawn-out onboarding.

Just straight into the deep end and hope you swim.

And I guessed... I *had* swum. Barely. But I was still above water.

Cryo ran a very tight ship, that much was obvious by now.

Tighter than I'd assumed at first, honestly.

From the outside, the crew had seemed loose—like freelancers half-assing it between real gigs. But looking back on the run we just pulled off, they were efficient. Fast. Deadly.

Cryo had slotted me into the formation like a new part in a machine and just expected it to work.

And it *had*.

'They're way more experienced than I gave them credit for,' I realized.

Vega hadn't been joking when he said Cryo had been around for a while.

A long while, at least in Operator years. Which wasn't saying much in regular years.

Most Operators didn't last long enough to even consider this a "career."

Five gigs. That was the average before getting zeroed.

And Cryo? He was probably pushing mid-triple digits by now, if I had to guess.

Faces like him usually lasted longer, sure. They picked their crews. Controlled the risk.

But they also took the heat when things went sideways.

Clients remembered the person who made the deal, not the trigger-pullers.

And enemies? They definitely remembered the one talking to them before everything went haywire, more so than the ones doing the shooting.

'I got lucky landing with this crew...' I caught myself smiling at the thought—just in time for it to die a quick death as Mouse groaned beside me again.

"Fucking fried too...? Fuuuuck..." he muttered, dragging some sparking component covered in some kind of stinking glibber out from his own body with all the casual misery of a guy trying to fix his coffee machine before work.

He'd been muttering like that the entire drive, still trying to patch himself up after eating my [Venombite] earlier. Poor guy looked like a hacked-together vending machine at this stage.

*'Well, I **did** warn him...'*

Finally, after a few more minutes of Mouse's nonstop groaning and static-crackling self-repair, Cryo pulled the car into a stop and gave a simple gesture—out we go.

I barely had time to glance around and clock that we were in some underground parking garage—dim lights, oil stains, the occasional flicker of exposed wiring—before the others were already moving.

Cryo led the way toward the nearest elevator, Pina right behind him, and Mouse trailing with a half-dead servo whine in his gait.

I had to quick-step to catch up, not wanting to get left behind.

The elevator ride was dead quiet. Not tense or awkward—just... quiet.

Everyone had their own thoughts to chew through.

Nobody broke the silence, unless you counted Mouse muttering every few seconds about circuits, burnouts, and how I owed him a drink or three for frying his internals.

I wasn't about to argue.

Then, the elevator dinged, and the doors slid open.

One by one, they filed out, with me bringing up the rear.

Stepping into the hallway felt like being slapped with a different reality.

Gone was the grime and decay of the garage—we were suddenly standing in a pristine, almost sterile corridor.

Bright-white lights.

Floors that had actually seen a mop sometime this decade. And dead ahead, glowing like a beacon, was a big, bold, neon-yellow sign above a set of thick, armored double-doors.

“O P N”

Clean, sharp, official. No frills. Just three letters that carried weight.

I stopped for half a second, just to take it in.

I was actually *here*. Not dreaming. Not imagining it.

After everything, after all the fighting and self-doubt and blood and chaos—I was here, about to walk into the damn OPN’s Office and get my license.

Not just talking about it. Not planning for it. *Doing* it.

That sign wasn’t just a label—it was a literal line in the sand.

Past this point, I stopped being a hopeful maybe and became someone who could actually move through the world with *agency* for once.

I was finally here...