

## Chapter 49 - Turbulences

Even with my significant injuries, I managed to clean surprisingly efficiently, likely courtesy of the exceptionally strong painkiller injection Mr. Stirling had administered. It was as if my physical traumas, ranging from the fall to the bullet wound in my leg and the presumably excruciating broken ribs, had never even existed in the first place.

I moved around with ease, almost forgetting the severity of my condition.

As I delved deeper into my cleaning tasks, focusing on every nook and cranny of our grimy apartment, the System quickly ended up rewarding my efforts. The familiar chime of a notification echoed in my mind, signalling a milestone in my unexpected venture into domestic skills.

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

[System]: *[Maid] Skill has reached level 1.*

Almost immediately, I felt the familiar feeling of the knowledge and muscle-memory download barge its way into my mind, this time, focused on whatever the [Maid] Skill entailed.

As the knowledge from the [Maid] Skill began to settle into my consciousness, I was severely taken aback by the sheer breadth it covered.

Far from the mundane tasks of household upkeep, the skill morphed into a comprehensive guide that extended well beyond the confines of cleaning, cooking, and laundry—which, while covered, were not nearly everything it presented me with.

Each aspect was meticulously detailed, albeit still on a basic level, as was to be expected from a level 1 download, revealing layers to these seemingly simple tasks that I hadn't anticipated.

The first big aspect covered etiquette, infusing me with an understanding of social graces, teaching me the nuances of polite conversation, how to set a table correctly for different occasions, and the art of being discreet yet present. It was akin to absorbing a manual on becoming the perfect host, guiding me through various social settings with grace and ease.

I immediately recognized this as something undoubtedly valuable to me, thinking back to Valeria's odd expectations for our "family dinners", as she liked to call them.

Surprisingly, the [Maid] Skill also included an intensive on maintaining proper posture as well. It wasn't just about looking poised either; this was about efficiency in movement, reducing strain, and presenting oneself in a manner that commanded respect. This section was unexpectedly enlightening, offering insights into how posture affects perception and personal health.

Some of Valeria's mannerism immediately made more sense in my mind, as a result of this part of the download. A lot of her apparent, intimidating and overpowering presence simply came from her specific posture and the way she presented herself, I now realised.

Abruptly, I also found myself equipped with a newfound sense of style, understanding not just what looked good in the common eye, but more importantly, *why* it did so. This knowledge spanned from selecting the appropriate attire for different occasions to understanding colour theory and fabric types, ensuring that not only the household I managed would look impeccable, but I would too, in any setting.

This knowledge immediately made me second-guess my current wardrobe, as, surprisingly enough, a fully black and grey wardrobe did not agree with this newfound knowledge of style and fashion—who would've thunk? I was utterly shocked by this, having been a black/grey person my entire previous life as well.

Next, the skill seamlessly transitioned into practical physical training, teaching me the correct techniques for lifting heavy objects without injury, even with my theoretically weak hand—which, of course I didn't have, thanks to [Ambidexterity].

This was also vastly more than just bend-at-the-knees advice; it was a comprehensive approach to physical exertion that included balance, core strength, and leveraging one's body efficiently to continuously be able to exert oneself without injury, as well as proper pacing to not run out of steam as easily.

It didn't end there, however, as the [Maid] Skill even ventured into the unexpected territory of stealth and discretion. It taught me how to move items—sometimes bulky or sensitive—from one location to another unnoticed. This part of the skill was like a primer on espionage within the household, ensuring privacy and security in the transportation of objects.

I had never even considered that such a thing would be part of an unassuming Skill like [Maid], but in hindsight, it made a lot of sense.

I had watched a metric ton of anime, tv-dramas and historical dramas in my past life and in any of them where a butler or maid had been even semi-present, their roles had always been vitally important for the clandestine operations of the master. Batman's Alfred coming to mind immediately made feel bad for previously snubbing the [Maid] Skill, which seemed to be the female equivalent in this world.

While butlers and maids definitely had entirely separate roles in a real household, it seemed that the Skills were simply rolled into one by the G.E.M.A. System.

Lastly and most astonishingly, the skill even covered methods to assist or, if necessary, carry individuals far heavier than myself. It detailed techniques to distribute someone's weight evenly, leverage my strength, and ensure both my safety and that of the person I was aiding.

This knowledge was practical, with applications ranging from assisting someone injured to scenarios requiring discreet relocation of individuals—something that could have been quite useful in my recent dealings with the female netrunner, I recognized.

Each segment of the [Maid] Skill was kept basic, yet remained rich with information, transforming mundane tasks into an art form that required finesse, strength, and a deep understanding of human interaction, both physically and mentally.

The most surprising aspect was the skill's sheer breadth and versatility, merging the traditional role of a maid with capabilities that bordered on those of a bodyguard or a confidential aide.

This skill wasn't just about maintaining a home; it was about mastering the environment and interactions within it, a realisation that left me utterly in awe of its unexpected complexity.

As I sat there on the couch, slightly breathless from the overwhelming influx of knowledge from the [Maid] Skill, which had made me stumble over here and take a seat in order to not fall again, I found myself staring blankly at the television across the room.

The sheer volume and variety of information I'd just absorbed were still settling in my mind, leaving me in a state of surprise and newfound appreciation.

*'Well, that was more than I expected for sure,'* I mused internally, a mixture of awe and practical consideration weaving through my thoughts.

Initially, I had dismissed the [Maid] Skill as somewhat trivial, but the depth and utility it offered had completely overturned that assumption. The Skill had unfolded into an intricate tapestry of knowledge, far exceeding my expectations.

The clandestine aspects of the Skill, in particular, intrigued me.

They promised to be invaluable in my journey as an Operator, offering techniques in stealth and discretion that could be crucial in sensitive situations. Additionally, the elements of etiquette and fashion sense were unexpected bonuses, skills that would undoubtedly aid in navigating complex social situations and perhaps even in managing the unpredictable demands of Valeria.

A smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth as I contemplated integrating the [Maid] Skill into my daily routine. *'Cleaning the apartment might just become my new favourite workout,'* I thought wryly. After all, the physical aspects of the [Maid] Skill could also contribute to my Body experience, so it wasn't cheating to count that as part of a workout. It was a perfect way to blend my need for physical training with a Skill grind that could give me some seriously useful downloads further down the line.

As I sat there, contemplating the feasibility of dedicating a full time slot to the [Maid] Skill, I found myself mumbling out loud, "Yeah... That could work." My tone was one of tentative consideration, not fully convinced of the value in investing substantial time into it.

The alternative strategy, akin to doing birdhouse runs, where I would clean sporadically for larger experience bursts, seemed appealing. Yet, the possibility of a more consistent, albeit smaller, experience gain was also tempting. The second would undoubtedly provide more consistent results and, at the end of the day, more experience overall, but it would also require a lot more time investment.

A thought then struck me, sparking a hint of excitement.

*'I should probably check the Perk Tree associated with this Skill,'* I thought, a smile playing on my lips.

The allure of exploring a new Perk Tree always added an extra layer of enjoyment to any RPG, and unlocking a new one with my first level in [Maid] seemed like a welcome bonus. It was like uncovering a hidden treasure in a game, offering new possibilities and pathways that could significantly influence my decision-making—something I was in need of right now, as it just so happened.

Pulling up the Perk Tree for the [Maid] Skill, I quickly read through all the options.

[Unseen Aide] [Requirement: Level 3 [Maid]]

*What the—?! Where did that Maid just come from?!* You gain the ability to more easily blend in with your surroundings inside of residential buildings, making you significantly harder to detect visually.

[Unheard Aide] [Requirement: Level 3 [Maid]]

*Wait, what? You have a Maid? I've never even heard of her!* You gain the ability to move around more stealthily inside of residential buildings, making you significantly harder to detect auditorily.

[Polished Posture] [Requirement: Level 3 [Maid]]

*Manners maketh man.* You gain the ability to more easily and gracefully sidestep incoming attacks you anticipate, provided you maintain impeccable posture and are capable of moving, making you significantly harder to hit through mundane means.

[Immaculate Cleaning] [Requirement: Level 3 [Maid]]

*Not a speck of dust remains.* You gain the ability to cleanse and organise areas, objects, or clothing to perfection using even the most mundane of supplies. Effortlessly erase any traces of your choosing, as long as the nature of the residue doesn't surpass the knowledge level of the Skill.

[Protective Repose] [Requirement: Level 3 [Maid]]

*Let me carry your luggage.* You gain the ability to perfectly safeguard any object in your care, ensuring it remains untouched by dirt, damage, or external influences below the Skill's knowledge level. This perk does not apply to living entities.

I found myself rooted to the couch, utterly bewildered by the [Perk] Tree laid out before me.

*'What the hell, these Perks are bonkers!' I silently railed against the System for keeping such treasures concealed until now. 'How does a random-ass Skill like [Maid] boast five staggeringly potent Perks? Even a universally essential Skill such as [Stealth] capped out at four. What's the deal with [Maid] getting such preferential treatment here, System?!'*

My frustration wasn't truly directed at the number of options available, of course; rather, it was the overwhelming nature of those choices that daunted me. Each Perk presented within the [Maid] Skill hinted at formidable enhancements, all potentially pivotal and undeniably useful for my current circumstances—and even offering some seriously valuable upgrades for a long time to come.

My irritation stemmed more from the looming necessity to select among them, once I reached [Maid] Level 3, rather than the surprise of encountering such an array of options.

*'Still, [Maid] having five Perks is such bullshit...'*

With newfound insight into the [Maid] Perk Tree, I decisively incorporated a half-hour of assorted cleaning tasks and other [Maid]-related activities into my daily schedule. The utility of the Perks was too significant to approach this Skill leisurely going forward.

"Might as well wrap this up first, give the place an extra thorough clean before hitting the sack," I murmured to myself.

Rising from the couch, I resumed my cleaning efforts around the apartment. This time, however, each of my movements carried a heightened sense of purpose and efficiency, fueled by the knowledge of the tangible rewards that lay within reach and the basic-level download I had just received...

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After dedicating an hour to meticulous cleaning, the apartment had transformed into a state of impeccable cleanliness, and I found myself soaked in sweat once more.

I paused to catch my breath after tucking away the basic cleaning supplies beneath the bathroom sink, then splashed my face with cool water. The thought of another shower crossed my mind, but the overwhelming weariness from the day's events began to reassert itself.

The temporary surge of energy I had experienced after waking up at Mr. Stirling's was fading quicker than anticipated. *'Might be wiser to keep things low-key for now... Given the severity of my injuries, standing without Mr. Stirling's painkillers would likely be impossible,'* I reasoned with myself.

With that, I slowly made my way to the room Gabriel and I shared.

As I gingerly settled onto my bed, I was acutely aware that recklessly diving in with multiple broken ribs would be unwise, despite the strong likelihood that the painkillers could numb any further harm I might inflict on myself.

I eased myself under the covers with deliberate caution.

Lying down, the full weight of my exhaustion, both physical and mental, hit me.

The day had morphed from an exhilarating mission to complete my second task into a chaotic disaster that nearly cost me my life and resulted in me taking someone else's.

*'What a complete fucking mess,'* I reflected on the tumultuous events of the day. The situation with Aki weighed heavily on my mind. *'If Mr. Stirling's suspicions are true, she's been deceiving me all this time...'*

My feelings about Aki were tangled and uncertain, the shock of the revelation preventing me from fully processing it and properly thinking about how to move forward.

I was certain that she had deceived me now, but the depth and purpose of her deception were still utterly unclear to me. Why would she go to such lengths to get close to me?

In this new world, I was hardly a person of influence or power. My interactions had been limited to just a few, select individuals since my arrival.

*'Could Aki be connected to something involving the original Sera...?' I pondered, trying to connect the dots. 'Or, maybe she's linked to the Clawed Beasts. Perhaps Vega was more persistent in trying to recruit me than I realised...'*

Despite my efforts, my mind was too weary to fully unravel the mystery surrounding Aki; in truth, I was reluctant to delve too deeply into it at the moment either way.

Aki had represented the possibility of my first genuine friendship in this world, someone seemingly close in age and, I suspected, with similar past experiences. But now, that potential friendship seemed to be unravelling, revealing yet another person possibly attempting to exploit me, seeking to uncover my secrets and ultimately betray me.

Honestly, I was deeply wounded by the whole ordeal with Aki.

She hadn't promised me anything, and perhaps I had been too eager to find a kindred spirit, someone to confide in and share my journey with in this strange world.

But could I really be blamed for seeking a genuine connection like this? I was all alone in this world, after all. Aside from Gabriel, who was practically never available now, there was nobody else I could truly confide in.

Was I really that wrong for wanting to just have a friend...?

Trying to dispel the swirling storm of thoughts, I shook my head vigorously, as if I could physically dislodge the disappointment, hurt and spiral of negative thoughts.

*'Pull yourself together, Sera. This is Neon Dragons, after all. Toughen up; betrayal is part of the game here. No point dwelling on it,'* I coached myself, aiming to lift my spirits.  
*'Tomorrow's a new day, dedicated to Skill and System deep dives. It'll be productive, you'll see...'*

Yet, despite the resolve for tomorrow, today still stretched out before me, demanding to be endured until I could hit the reset button with a restorative sleep. With a long, drawn-out sigh, I prepared to engage the Rest Function, hoping to escape at least some of the day's weight.

But as I was about to do so, a cascade of pending notifications from the day's escapades flickered into my awareness. I paused, considering them for a brief moment before deciding against diving into them.

As much as I loved seeing numbers go brr, my current state of mind just couldn't muster the enthusiasm. I swiped them away unseen and accessed the Rest Function instead.

Eyes closing, I committed to an eight-hour rest with the System, fervently wishing that upon waking, the slate would be wiped clean, and I could start afresh, hopefully to the rest of a day that held fewer disappointments and more clarity going forward...

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As my eyes fluttered open the next moment, the instant shift from deep sleep to alertness, courtesy of the Rest Function, left me momentarily disoriented as per usual.

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

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

With a brief head shake to clear the lingering haze, I rapidly started to assess my condition, beginning with my ribs.

A sense of relief washed over me as I discovered my ribs were fully healed—no longer broken, cracked, or bruised. I then examined the rest of my body, particularly the areas along my right side that had suffered from the impact of bullets against my jacket.

Just like with my ribs, I found no trace of bruises or injuries, which put a satisfied smile on my face; at least something had gone according to my calculations today.

Gingerly, I began unwrapping the high-quality bandages Mr. Stirling had applied to my leg.

The thought of washing and reusing them flickered in my mind, a practical consideration I noted for later research. My first-aid supplies were extremely limited, so salvaging these very high quality, water-proof bandages could be a significant upgrade to my current setup—which was essentially just a half-used, low-cost spray bandage can.

As I methodically removed each layer, the sight of blood absorbed into the fabric made my heart sink. It seemed like a tall order, even for the Rest Function, to completely heal a bullet wound in just eight hours. Apprehension built up as I peeled off the final layer.

I braced myself, knowing my stomach wasn't the strongest when it came to gore.

But when the last of the bandage came off, my breath hitched, turning into a fit of coughing.

Where I expected a gruesome wound, there was nothing. My skin was as unblemished as it had been that very morning, with no trace of the injury, not even a scar. It was like the events of the day had never even transpired on my body in the first place.

A sense of awe and relief washed over me.

"Fucking hell... That Rest Function is seriously the best!" I muttered, astounded by the miraculous recovery. With a newfound zest, courtesy of my System's seemingly magical healing powers, I leaped out of bed, curious to see if Oliver and Gabriel were around, given the hour.

Venturing out, I indeed found them both in the middle of some idle conversation at the dining table, their day's adventures spilling into the evening air. My appearance prompted a brief

pause, greetings were exchanged, and almost immediately, Gabriel inquired, "Sera, did you clean the house or something? The place looks downright spotless."

Responding with a casual shrug, I confirmed, "Yeah, figured it was about damn time someone did something about this dirty place. Returning to a home besieged by dust and grime after a day's work wasn't exactly the highlight of my day, you know? Always made me feel like taking a whole host of showers, just to get clean."

Gabriel's response came with a knowing grin, "Can't argue with that. It's great to see you moving around again... And stuff. Noticed you were resting earlier, so I didn't want to disturb. How's everything at the food stall?"

It was clear that Gabe was trying to gauge my current state, likely both a physical and mental check-up considering Sera's and his history and the emotional outbursts that he had shared a few days prior.

Eager to alleviate his concerns about his sister vanishing once more, and craving some genuine human interaction untouched by deceit, I took a seat beside him. I started elaborating on my supremely boring day at Mr. Shori's food stall, which involved absolutely no getting shot at whatsoever and no near-death experiences either; very predominantly none of either of those.

Oliver, seated across us, split his attention between our conversation and his dinner, occasionally glancing past the documents he was perusing on his cerebral interface to give us a knowing nod or other.

After sharing my experiences at Mr. Shori's, curiosity got the better of me, so I turned the conversation towards Gabe, wondering how his own endeavours in debt repayment were faring, especially since my own journey had encountered its fair share of... Let's say "turbulence".

"How's work been treating you?" I inquired, my interest twofold: A blend of genuine concern and a desire to connect.

Gabe's expression clouded as he began, "Work's been a beast, to put it mildly." He sighed, the strain evident. "The endless hours are a killer, but I'm hanging in there. What's really been grinding my gears, though, are the fucking customers. There's this... **vibe**, lately, that's turning even the regulars into a bunch of complete and utter blanks. I've had to call in security way more than usual—like, four times more, which is just bizarre, y'know? Luckily, things haven't escalated to physical confrontations, but it's enough to make you wonder what's stirring up all this agitation..."

Oliver's interjection caught both Gabe and me off guard.

"It's the corporations," he stated, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "Particularly in the Felstaedt and Fujioma districts, there's been a noticeable uptick in corporate activity, sparking widespread unease across the entire city. The influx of corporate security forces is, in turn, requiring more Neo Avalis police to keep the peace, which then ends up squeezing the gangs, leading to heightened tensions all over the place. It's like we're all sitting on a



ticking time bomb. The same unease permeates my workplace too; people are on edge, to say the least"

He paused, a deep sigh escaping him as if burdened by an immense load, then elaborated, "The situation I've been dealing with at work is far more complex than we initially thought. It's not just an isolated incident at my little transport company that I work at; several major corporations have been severely hit, including Rockefeller, Falkum Industries, NanoSpike, Data Pulse, and even Sobirashu itself has suffered significant losses of crucial research data. The streets are abuzz with speculation about a major upheaval underway. The consensus is that things are likely to escalate before any semblance of normalcy returns. I ask the both of you to stay as low-key as possible in the coming days and weeks, until this all blows over, alright?"

Oliver's unusually forthright and grave demeanour was startling, a side of him I'd never witnessed. Even Gabe appeared to be slightly rattled by the gravity of Oliver's insight.

We hesitantly concurred with his advice, realising that he actually sought concrete affirmation from us after a few moments, which visibly relieved some of his burden. With that, Oliver turned his attention back to his documents, leaving Gabe and me exchanging worried looks, silently pondering the implications of Oliver's warnings.

The conversation with Oliver stirred memories I had previously set aside about the disruptions at his workplace.

*'This has to be related to the OriginTech incident, doesn't it?' I pondered, attempting to piece together what I knew about the only major event involving such widespread data breaches across major corporations before the game's launch. 'Unless this version of Neo Avalis has significantly deviated from the game's narrative already, which isn't entirely impossible given the unexpected death of Matsuiro Kobayashi, that's the only thing it could be...'*

Quickly, I recognized the futility in trying to draw definitive conclusions at this point, however.

The extent to which this world paralleled or diverged from the game's narrative remained unclear, and it seemed only time would reveal how closely the events here would align with those leading up to the game's fictional timeline.

My focus had always been on the game's immediate narrative, neglecting the deep dive into its historical context. Regrettably, I hadn't paid much attention to the lore enthusiasts in my daily viewing marathons, whose insights would have been invaluable now. My lack of comprehensive background knowledge left me ill-prepared to fully grasp the implications of our current situation or how closely it mirrored the game's lore.

I also briefly considered asking Oliver about more specifics or maybe even asking about OriginTech itself, but stopped myself immediately.

*'There's no way that Sera would know about any of this. Asking him about it would just lead to questions I am ill-suited to answer,' I recognized, holding my tongue for now. 'Not like there's a stock market we could invest in to make a quick buck off of this whole thing either anyway, so it's not like we're really losing out on anything... I think.'*

I'd have to figure out how this whole incident was likely going to affect me and the rest of the family at some point, but with my limited resources and my viewpoint being entirely restricted to the megabuilding itself, there wasn't much I could do for now.

Ultimately, Gabe and I shared a few more tidbits of our recent, work-related adventures before we retired for bed.

I, of course, was not going back to sleep, considering that I had just woken up from the last rest and instead opted into some more [Programming] and [Quick-Hacks] training via the SPG-01 shard.

Tomorrow would be a day full of System-related research as well as unlocking a ton of Skills and seeing if there were any that I could unlock that I didn't even know existed, but for tonight, I'd just hunker down with something I already knew a bit of: Netrunning.

About an hour into my intensive training session with Kill Joy, I was jolted by the unexpected arrival of a message. My pulse quickened as I saw it was from Valeria, bracing myself for potential bad news.

With a mix of apprehension and urgency, I opened the message:

["You will be partaking in your first martial arts session tomorrow at the Arkion dojo. Your schedule has been updated with all necessary information and you will be expected to be on time. Do not disappoint me."]

A heavy sigh of relief escaped my lips, realising it was merely a follow-up to my recent request at the family dinner for martial arts training. While this slightly disrupted my plans for the next day, the prospect of receiving formal training, especially in light of Oliver's ominous warnings and the day's harrowing events, sparked a sense of anticipation in me.

The likelihood of acquiring new skills at the dojo, undoubtedly beneficial for both self-defence and my ongoing exploration of the System, was a huge get.

Reinvigorated by these thoughts, I refocused on the session with Kill Joy, eager to maximise my grinding time for the night, before I started my extensive research session into the G.E.M.A. System and its Skills...