

Chapter 74 - Burnout

The smell of seared flesh hung in the air as the world slowly stopped spinning around me.

My eyes were unfocused, tears of pain blinding me almost entirely as I tried to roll off my bed.

Whimpers, groans, and curses were the only things leaving my mouth as I stumbled my way across the apartment, bouncing off several walls and doorways during my desperate bid for relief.

I could still feel the phantom pain of the arm I had lost in Cyberspace, the myriad of injuries I had sustained fighting against both the daemon and the netrunner, and the mental exhaustion that came with it.

But nothing hurt as much as the burning piece of metal in my neck.

It felt like someone had dropped a red-hot ingot on my spine, the cerebral link aggressively burning through flesh, muscle, and blood from the massive amounts of heat generated by my overuse of the quick-hacks.

A whimper of elation left my mouth involuntarily as I made it into the bathroom—just a few more steps. I turned on the faucet and cranked the lever to the coldest setting before pushing my entire head and upper chest under the rushing water; letting it all cascade down my back.

The moment the cold water hit my cerebral link, two things happened.

I shuddered from the coldness, goosebumps appearing all over my body and splashing water everywhere like some human-dog hybrid; and the first bouts of water hitting the link vaporised—immediately turning to steam upon contact with the searing hot piece of metal in my spine.

Breathing in sharply from the mix of pain and bliss at the momentary relief, I ended up with water trickling down the sides of my face and into my throat, triggering a massive coughing fit as I tried to keep my head submerged.

It felt like I was half-waterboarding myself, my lungs screaming for a proper, deep breath while the rest of my body craved the cold water's embrace to stay sane.

At some point, the coughing turned into full-on vomiting as my body started giving out—the stress, pain, and awkward angle I was standing at proving too much to handle; but I forced myself to stay upright, link under the water.

By the time my cerebral link had cooled down enough to stop causing severe burns, I just collapsed to the ground in front of the sink, breathing heavily as my legs gave out beneath me.

It took several minutes for my brain to slowly reboot, regaining some motor and cognitive functions, finally allowing me to take in the extent of the damage.

My body felt like it had been through a meat grinder.

The combined phantom pain from Cyberspace, the real exhaustion, the repressed coughing and vomiting, and the actual pain from the cerebral link burning through my flesh sent continuous, searing hot jolts through my entire body.

I just sat on the wet bathroom floor, letting time pass me by, trying to recoup some energy while the sink continued to spew out ice-cold water, which I paid no attention to.

I had no idea how much time passed until I finally gathered enough strength to fill my lungs with proper air again.

Gingerly, I started to assess the damage.

Moving my hand over my shoulder, I carefully inched closer to the cerebral link, feeling the irritated and reddened skin on my back. As I neared the actual piece of tech, I winced at the touch, no matter how careful and light I tried to be.

"That's not good..." I muttered to myself, my voice hoarse and rasping more than I expected.

Continuing to feel out the damage on my back, I stopped my hand shortly after discovering the first major injury. Around the cerebral link, there was a furrow carved into my back where the muscles, blood, and tissue had been burned away by the tech. It felt like the cerebral link had been crudely slapped into that space, waiting to be filled with packing foam to fit properly.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I winced with each word, the slight movements caused by opening my mouth and producing the sounds sending hot electricity through my body, radiating out from my back.

'*What the fuck do I do?!*' I thought desperately.

The damage on my back was so severe that, in my old world, I'd likely have ended up in the hospital for months, scarred for life at the very least, unless I somehow managed to get one of those rare, new skin-grafts.

I scrambled and limped toward the medicine cabinet, retrieving a can of spray-bandage. It felt heavy in my hands as I turned it over, my thoughts disjointed as I tried to plan my next steps.

'*Should I cover it up with this...? Will the Rest Function even fix me...? It should, right? But what if there's spray-bandage inside the wound; will it just... assimilate it? Not work at all?*'

Finally, I turned off the sink, letting the damp quiet of the bathroom wash over me.

I sat down on the ground again, my legs feeling like jello and refusing to cooperate.

Closing my eyes, I breathed as calmly as I could, trying to enter a meditative trance to clear my mind and form coherent thoughts again.

'In... Out... In... Out...'

I was relieved to feel the pain radiating throughout my body disperse with every breath. Gradually, my mind became calmer, no longer screaming at me to end the pain.

More time passed, and I finally opened my eyes again.

The pain levels had reduced to a manageable degree, roughly what it had felt like standing in Miss K's dojo before the final round where I lost my eye against Kenzie.

With more coherent thoughts finally possible, I forced myself to deal with the current set of issues, one step at a time.

'Alright, Sera. Think. First things first: Do spray bandages interfere with the Rest Function?' I pondered.

Thinking back to all the times I had been injured and used the spray bandages before, I realised I had never ended up with a lot of it inside the wound. While some had almost certainly found its way inside, as would be expected with a spray bandage, it had never been enough to cause me concern.

The straight-up furrows on the sides of my cerebral link, however, were far too large for the spray bandage to simply cover over. I was missing literal chunks of flesh and muscle around the piece of metal, which would likely be filled out by the spray bandage to some degree.

'They are designed to be sterile and degradable by the body, so that's not an issue, but will it interfere with the healing...?' I wondered. I wasn't even sure if the Rest Function would be able to fix me at this stage, if nothing was interfering at all.

In the game, the Rest Function allowed you to get back to full HP, but it couldn't regenerate body parts. Once you lost a certain chunk of your body, you'd usually have to visit a Ripper or Slicer to get some synth-muscle and skin before the Rest Function could bond and fix up the rest of the injuries.

So the question wasn't just whether the bandage would interfere but whether the Rest Function would even work to begin with.

Making an executive decision, realising I was wasting precious time just staring at the can in my hand, I returned it to the medicine cabinet, opting not to cover the open burn wound on my back.

My [First-Aid] Skill was pretty cross with my decision, insisting I should cover severe burns with sterile, antibacterial gauze and keep them warm, but I didn't have anything like that available right now.

The medicine cabinet was thoroughly undersupplied, no matter how you looked at it.

'I'll just have to hope the Rest Function will work...' I thought as I started slowly cleaning up the bathroom floor. I mopped up the water and the splashes of my own stomach's contents that had missed the sink during my coughing fit.

The work progressed slowly; I could barely move my arms without causing severe pain to radiate out from the top of my spine.

But somehow, I still managed to make the bathroom presentable enough after a while.

Limping out of the bathroom in a bit of a hunched state—the best posture I could manage that only radiated severe pain from my back, rather than utterly debilitating pain—I made my way back to my room.

Immediately, I was hit with the pungent stench of seared flesh and sweat.

I barely managed to hold myself together, dry heaving and gagging at the utterly disgusting smell. This would be seriously hard to explain if Gabriel or Oliver stopped by anytime soon.

There were no windows in our room since the apartment was situated inside the Megabuilding rather than towards one of the outer edges, meaning I only really had one recourse for this problem.

I cranked up the AC all the way, hoping it would suck as much of the pungent, putrid air out of the room as possible.

'That's not going to be enough...' I thought, trying to come up with a way to get rid of the smell.

The first idea that popped into my mind was layering another, more pleasant smell over it, but I wasn't exactly stocked up on scented candles. I didn't have much to cook with either, so the kitchen was out of the question.

There was only one thing I could think of, even though I knew it would only make the room even less inhabitable for the foreseeable future. Moving through the putrid smell, I quickly reached my bed, pulled out a can of spray deodorant and the single bottle of perfume that original Sera owned.

I started generously dousing the room with deodorant.

This was something I had often done in my past life, primarily to cover the smell of food in my studio apartment. I had a bit of a complex when it came to food smells—if there was a lingering smell after I ate, I'd get nauseous until I vomited.

So I had often resorted to using scented candles or cheap spray deodorant to mask the odour, even if it made the place nearly uninhabitable for a while.

The same thing was quickly happening to my current room.

I held my breath as best I could while nearly emptying the spray deodorant. I didn't use much of the perfume, figuring that original Sera hadn't been a big spender, but the bottle looked surprisingly nice—potentially a gift.

With the room doused in deodorant and hopefully becoming livable in the next few hours, I collapsed on the sofa in the living room, utterly spent and breathing heavily.

I had too many things to think about, too many things to work on, but nothing took priority over the gaping hole in my neck right now.

I positioned myself so the severe burns wouldn't be visible if Gabriel or Oliver happened to stumble into the apartment.

With a weary sigh, I punched in a solid eight hours of rest into the Rest Function window, hoping that it would be enough to start healing my wounds and clear my mind...

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My eyes fluttered open, and, as usual, it felt like no time had passed.

Even without the Notification popping up in front of my face, however, I knew I'd slept for a good while for a couple of reasons.

First and foremost, my pain levels were drastically reduced. Not gone, which was a problem in and of itself, but at a level where I could function for the rest of the day without trouble.

The other reason was Gabriel sitting on one of the couch chairs at the coffee table nearby, watching television—he was home.

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

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

Looking over the System Notification, I felt my heart skip a beat.

'Damn it... The Rest didn't fully heal me,' I thought, a creeping dread setting in. The hole in my neck was likely still there.

I slowly moved my hand towards my neck, trying not to clue Gabriel in that I was awake, feeling for the injury and trying to assess just how bad I had messed up with that Cyberspace trip.

If the Rest Function couldn't fix me, then I was in seriously deep trouble.

I felt around my cerebral link, letting my fingers gently trace the grooves of its connection with my skin and the partial grooves left from the burnout. My [Slicing] and [First-Aid] Skills helped me quantify and qualify the remaining damage, and I breathed out a quiet sigh of relief.

*'Looks like the Rest Function **is** working after all. It just didn't heal me all the way... Maybe a second set of eight hours will fix me completely—this is definitely something I'll have to keep*

in mind for potential future injuries,’ I mused as I settled into the sofa again, breathing calmly to quiet my heart, which had started pounding at the realisation that I might have some long-lasting damage after all.

Not feeling quite up to talk to Gabriel quite yet, as it would likely involve some pointed questions about our room and a lot of conscious effort to make sure he didn’t see my neck, I instead went over the rest of the System Notifications that I had ignored over the past few hours.

[System]: *100xp gained for [Manifestation] Skill.*
[System]: *400xp gained for [Programming] Skill.*
[System]: *900xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.*
[System]: *1,600xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.*
[System]: *[Quick-Hacks] has reached Level 3. Perk Point Available.*
[System]: *200xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.*
[System]: *[Stealth] Skill has reached current maximum. Higher Edge Attribute required.*
[System]: *100xp gained for [Meditation] Skill.*
[System]: *300xp gained for [Acrobatics] Skill.*
[System]: *400xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*
[System]: *[CQC] Skill Unlocked. Maximum Number of Skills (30/30) reached.*
[System]: *300xp gained for [CQC] Skill.*
[System]: *700xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*
[System]: *400xp gained for Body Attribute.*
[System]: *600xp gained for Reflex Attribute.*
[System]: *400xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

[System]: *Daemon (Slime) defeated.*
[System]: *55xp (+50xp) gained for defeating Daemon (Slime). [First-Kill Bonus Experience]*
[System]: *Daemon (Slime) drops 1x (**Uncommon**) Data-Shard. [First-Kill Drop Chance Bonus]*

It was a hell of a lot to take in, but I managed to catch the general gist fairly quickly.

I had gained the [CQC] Skill from fighting the Daemon, along with a decent amount of general character experience, something I hadn’t had access to up until now, barring the Task completions.

While the Daemon itself had only provided 5xp, the first-kill bonus had given me about three-quarters as much as I would have gotten from one of the Data Collection Tasks.

Furthermore, all the Skills I had used inside Cyberspace were clearly working towards being upgraded, even if I wasn’t using them in real life—there were tremendous implications to unpack here, but I didn’t have the nerve or time to do so right now.

What mattered for me now was simply the fact that I had made some serious progress on all fronts.

The next major point on the agenda, before I rushed off to the bathroom to spray bandage my neck and try to hide the injury from Gabriel as best I could, was to finish up the Perk

selection for [Netrunning] and [Quick-Hacks], now that I had finally unlocked the Perk points for both.

I had spent a lot of time recently thinking about the Perks and which ones I'd go with once I finally had the points available, so the choices were made quickly.

For [Netrunning], I chose [Spectral Scanner].

I couldn't help but think that if I had had this one earlier, the whole incident with the enemy netrunner would likely not have happened in the same way, if at all. The Perk would have almost definitely allowed me to catch the hidden scanners before accidentally walking into them and alerting the netrunner ahead of time.

[System]: *[Spectral Scanner] (Netrunning) Perk acquired.*

[Spectral Scanner] (Netrunning 3)

Give me just one ping... You gain the ability to use your device's specs to scan cyberspace around you for hidden entities, objects or daemons. The range and level of detection is determined by the knowledge-level of the Skill.

For [Quick-Hacks], I had already decided to go with [Spiritus Machina] for a couple of reasons.

First off, it was the only Perk available that would set my programs and quick-hacks apart from others.

It wasn't just a Perk that would benefit me directly while using it; I could also profit off it. Given my current, embarrassingly low funds, I figured having an edge like this would come in handy as I tried climbing the Operator and Netrunner ladder.

Secondly, especially after my recent Cyberspace ordeal, I valued stealth for my netrunning activities more than raw firepower—at least for now. Maybe once I got more comfortable with the whole thing and had a lot more subroutines and segments to choose from, firepower would seem more appealing.

But for now, avoiding another netrunner chase like the one I just had was a top priority.

Lastly, none of the other options provided something I needed immediately.

Both [Subroutine Synthesis] and [Segment Mastery] required pre-existing code bases, which I basically had none of. And [Data Spike] worked a lot better with a variety of quick-hacks, which I also didn't have access to right now.

So, [Spiritus Machina] would not only help me build my own library by making coding foundations easier to grasp, but it would also be active from the start. That meant every single one of my future segments and subroutines would benefit from the Perk right away. I wouldn't need to rewrite or reacquire anything later on.

[System]: [Spiritus Machina] (Quick-Hacks) Perk acquired.

[Spiritus Machina] (Quick-Hacks 3)

Be a literal Ghost inside their systems! You gain the ability to code your programs and Quick-Hack subroutines with additional stealth layers, allowing them to remain undetected for far longer than usual.

With those Perks equipped, I carefully pretended to wake up, murmuring and stretching to catch Gabriel's attention.

"Finally awake, huh?" he asked, his voice filled with mirth. "Tried talking to you a bit earlier, but you seemed completely out of it. Rough day at the stall?"

"Something like that," I replied, giving him a non-committal answer.

A brief moment of silence hung between us as our eyes met. His right eyebrow raised a bit before he asked, "Do I want to know what the fuck happened in our room or...?"

So, the AC hadn't managed to clear everything out by the time he came back, it seemed.

"Better if you didn't. Nothing bad, really; just some failed experiments from the stall," I retorted with a grimace spreading across my face. "Won't happen again; promise."

"Well, as long as you're sure..." Gabriel replied, just as non-committally. I wondered briefly whether he was questioning my explanation or if something else was bothering him, but I decided to accept his words for now.

"You wanna eat some dinner then? I saw you brought some extra ramen and I'm positively starving. Figured I'd wait for you to get back up before eating."

I gave him a terse nod as I got up from the couch and stretched lightly.

"Gonna head to the bathroom first, though. Can you set everything up on the table, Gabe?"

"Sure thing," he said, getting up and heading to the kitchen area.

He nodded and rose from his cushioned sofa to start preparing the table. I made good use of this short distraction to quickly head into the bathroom, close the door behind me, and start applying the spray bandage to my neck.

'I'll need to change clothes too; there's no shot my shirt isn't drenched in dried blood on the back,' I thought as I finished up. I flushed the toilet, just to make it seem like I had actually been using the bathroom, before peeking out of the room to check on Gabriel.

He was busy placing plates and the high-tech containers of ramen onto the table, so I took that opportunity to rush into our room and quickly change my shirt into a pullover—one of the few pieces of clothing I had managed to pick up recently.

It would do a much better job of hiding the neck wound, which was burning slightly from the irritation of the spray bandage, despite the painkillers included with it.

I headed back into the living room and sat down at the dinner table as Gabriel finished setting up.

We dug into the ramen, and I asked him about his day at work. "How's the double-shift treating you? You holding up okay?" I asked, genuinely curious and a bit concerned.

Gabriel shrugged, giving me a tired smile. "It's rough, but you know how it is. Just gotta keep pushing through. What about you? How's Mr. Shori's stall been treating you? Still cooking?"

I filled him in on the latest happenings at the stall, leaving out the more harrowing details of my day. "It's been busy, but nothing I can't handle. And yeah, still cooking. Who do you think made that ramen, huh?" I replied with a smug smile, trying to keep things light.

The evening continued like this and ended up being unexpectedly pleasant.

We shared stories, laughed a bit, and for a while, I felt the tension in my muscles and the constant mental alertness I had been under recently start to fade.

It was a nice, calm evening, and I realised just how much I needed it. The knots in my muscles eased, and the hair-trigger alertness I'd been living with lately seemed to recede.

But, as usual, our time together was short-lived.

Gabriel needed to get to bed to have enough energy for another double-shift the next day, and I also had to hit the sack to recharge for work and a visit to Miss K's dojo.

Unofficially, I was desperate to get back to bed for another eight hours of Rest, hoping it would fully heal my neck.

As I walked back to my bed, my eyes landed on my pillow: it was drenched in dried blood and sweat, with slight burn marks.

'Right... Probably can't save this one, but I'll throw it in the wash anyway, see if it can be salvaged,' I thought to myself with a sigh. I redid my bedding and tossed the whole set into the washing machine.

Sitting down on the freshly changed bed, I noticed the data-shard laying on top of the blanket. I picked it up, turning it over in my hands, thoughts of the day swirling in my mind.

It looked pretty nondescript, just like any other regular data-shard I'd seen before, except for its green hue. But I couldn't help getting excited as I stared at it. Slotting it into my neck-slot, I was greeted by the exact window I had been hoping for.

[==**Uncommon** Data-Shard #024 Contents==]

[1x Hypercoagulin Injector]

[{c}33 Credits]

With a simple flick of a mental lever, I claimed both rewards and was startled when a roughly 10cm long injector suddenly appeared in my hand.

“Holy shit...” I mouthed, staring at it in utter disbelief.

[(Insufficient Access) has transferred {c}33 to your account with the note: “{Claimed Reward from: Data-Shard #024}”]

While I hadn't expected the System to lie about the rewards, I had imagined it would be more... subtle.

Maybe a ring at the door with a package, or some kind of random event where I'd stumble upon it. But straight up... teleporting? Manifesting? Creating an injector from nothing, directly into my hands?

A cold shiver ran down my back at the implications, but I couldn't help but smile regardless.

This was a massive game-changer, no matter how I looked at it. Being able to earn these types of randomised rewards while I was out doing netrunning business or even as an Operator to shore up my Task rewards further?

That was something I could definitely work with.

For now, however, I had to punch in another eight hours of Rest to hopefully fix up my neck before tomorrow's visit to Miss K's dojo.

Confirming the entered length of my intended rest, I instantly fell asleep...