

Chapter 65 - Netrunning Speed Grind

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Those were the only sounds echoing around my apartment as my newly acquired throwing knives found their marks in the makeshift targets I'd set up.

On my way out of Misha's Emporium, I had snagged some odds and ends from Misha to use as targets—items she was apparently more than happy to part with.

Among the assortment were half a dozen torn pieces of clothing and a couple of broken cases. I had draped the clothing over the cases, not just for a bit of impromptu target practice, but also to ensure no stray shards of plastic would come flying my way.

Safety was, after all, a priority.

Despite my [Throwing] Skill being one of my most developed ones, I had never actually thrown real knives before; something I'd have to get used to if I intended to make this a part of my Operator setup.

This reality check nudged me to start with some very basic practice.

The System might have blessed me with downloaded muscle memory, but there was a very tangible difference between leaning entirely on those downloads and executing the skills firsthand—as I vividly learned during my dojo sessions with Kenzie.

I practised throwing the knives exactly as they had come out of the box, opting not to use my [Sharpen] Perk and potentially shorten their lifespan unless absolutely necessary.

While sharpening them would undoubtedly make them deadlier, it offered no benefits to their durability. In fact, the heightened sharpness would very likely increase their chance of chipping or breaking.

After about thirty minutes of intense practice, I felt like I had gotten the hang of no-spin throwing. I had experimented with right-handed, left-handed, and even dual-wielding throws, covering all potential attack modes I might need as well.

'That's enough for today. There's too much netrunning stuff I need to get into, and I can't afford to spend more time on this,' I told myself as I stashed the makeshift targets in my wardrobe and placed the knives by my bed. *'I need to find a proper holster or something for these knives as well...'*

For now, my plan was to tuck them into one of the many belts of my Operator outfit, but that was clearly a temporary fix, not a long-term solution. Ideally, I'd craft some reinforced pockets with [Tailoring] or a similar Skill, but time and materials were beyond short in supply.

With the Operator meeting looming, I couldn't put off my other preparations for even one extra hour. So, I flopped onto my bed and plugged in the SPG-01 shard as I had so many times before.

Typically, I limited my netrunning training to just a few hours at a time—the setup reminded me too much of traditional schooling, which brought back some less-than-pleasant memories from my previous life; unfortunately one of the things I still remembered with vivid clarity.

Today, though, was going to be different.

But for today, I intended to get at least 10-12 hours of solid training with Kill Joy under my belt.

I had to get myself ready for my inaugural delve into the Cyberspace of Neo Avalis, to earn some very real experience in what it meant to be a netrunner. After all, if I wanted to sell myself as one, I'd have to be able to pretend that I knew what I was doing in the Cyberspace; at the very least.

So I threw myself into the lessons with rabid abandon, trying to get through them quickly to finally unlock the first parts of my quick-hack library and start doing some netrunner business...

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Four hours into my netrunning grind, I took a much-needed break upon receiving Gabriel's usual heads-up text that he was heading home. Eager for some downtime and dinner with my brother, I reluctantly unhooked myself from the shard.

As I stretched, every joint in my body popped—a harsh reminder of the toll such intense focus could take.

'Thank God for my daily workouts, or this lifestyle would utterly wreck me in no time at all,' I mused. 'How the fuck did I do this all day, every day in my last life? No wonder I was a complete fucking mess like that...'

I quickly scrolled through the flood of System Notifications I'd ignored while plugged in, confirming my progress had been unusually smooth today:

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

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

[System]: 900xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.

[System]: 700xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.

[System]: [Quick-Hacks] has reached Level 2.

[System]: 400xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Edge Attribute.

Kill Joy had introduced me to a sort of training wheels version of Cyberspace.

It was a far cry from the real digital abyss I'd eventually navigate, designed more as a soft introduction to the concept of existing as a digital entity rather than a flesh-and-blood human.

It was exceedingly odd, to say the least, but the digital world functioned very much like the physical one to a surprising degree.

All my physical Attributes seemed to be mirrored in the Cyberspace almost 1:1, and even my Perks functioned just as they would in the real world—one of the first things I had tried and something that had sent a massive surge of relief through me.

Having access to things such as [Wall-Runner] and [Lightfoot] would be undoubtedly invaluable, when it came to actually navigating the massive digital world that I was bound to explore at some stage later this week.

They weren't the only perks that truly shone in today's session either. I finally had gotten the chance to really put [Programming Maestro] to the test, and honestly, it almost moved me to tears with its effectiveness.

Kill Joy had this knack for throwing programming challenges at me like pop quizzes.

The format felt less like school exams and more like a puzzle where any solution that worked was good enough.

"It's about understanding how to solve the problem, not making it pretty," he'd say, and I couldn't agree more. After all, when you're hacking into a data vault, it doesn't matter if the code is a bit rough around the edges as long as it gets the door open.

Today's challenges built on previous lessons, focusing mainly on quick-hacks and the underlying ideas necessary to begin crafting my own subroutines.

While I wasn't yet at the point of creating my very first one from scratch—a milestone that would also allow me to keep and use it for my own purposes—I felt my thought processes aligning more and more with what Kill Joy had likely envisioned when designing the curriculum initially.

The feeling of making steady progress like this, especially as it was really quick progress thanks to [Programming Maestro] making sure that I always came up with a solution to whatever problem I ran into—even if it wasn't the most optimal or pretty one; was extremely addicting.

If it hadn't been for Gabriel's message, I doubt I would have even noticed how quickly four hours had passed or how much I needed to step away for a bit. It was one of the most gratifying grind sessions I'd had in this world recently, or maybe ever.

I was still more partial to my early [Juggling] experiences, though that was likely more due to nostalgia than an actual enjoyment of the monotonous action of tossing sock balls over and over.

Nonetheless, I was about 20-30 hours away from finishing this current module of the shard.

After that, I'd dive into the last module, which was all about [Manifestation]—something entirely new to me.

In the game, [Manifestation] wasn't a Skill, or at least there wasn't one by that specific name, but it was quickly becoming apparent that it was a Skill I'd need to master thoroughly.

At the start of each lesson now, Kill Joy had me "manifest" my own chair to sit in.

The mere fact that I could create something in a virtual space that wasn't initially mine, solely based on my understanding of the mechanics of the digital world and supported by my netrunning skills, hinted at its potentially nearly limitless power once fully mastered.

If I could manifest a chair, what was to stop me from conjuring up anything else I could imagine? There had to be some limitations, of course, but uncovering what those actually were was key.

The ability to materialise things like doors, ladders, or even larger constructs like vehicles within Cyberspace could be an incredibly powerful tool.

I was in the middle of prepping some of Mr. Shori's leftover ramen boxes for dinner, noting briefly that I'd have to stock back up on those the following day, as I hadn't gotten around to it today due to the whole Clawed Beasts incident, when Gabriel came home.

The sound of the door swooshing open had become all too familiar, yet this time, as Gabriel limped in, my heart skipped a beat.

It was hard not to flashback to that horrific day he'd stumbled in, bleeding and on death's door, begging for my assistance.

But then I remembered—today was just his first session with Miss K at the dojo.

Pushing aside the jolt of concern, I tried to keep my expression neutral, not wanting to let on just how amused I was to see my big brother looking so roughed up from the training session.

"Welcome home, Gabe! How did the sesh go?" I greeted him, doing my best to sound casual.

As he shuffled closer, I was genuinely surprised by how unscathed he appeared, especially compared to the messes I had found myself in.

Sure, he had a swollen eye, a bloodied nose, his cheeks looked like those of a squirrel trying to mass food for the winter and he was limping very slowly while consistently grunting and groaning in pain, but compared to the fact that I had *literally* ended up in the hospital and required surgery to replace a fucking eye, he had come out a lot better than me; no question!

Gabriel practically collapsed into the chair opposite mine at the kitchen table, letting out a heavy sigh as he closed his eyes to simply exist for a moment.

I gave him space, knowing too well how drained I felt after my bouts with Kenzie—ignoring even the injuries.

"It was... intense," he finally said, his eyes still closed. "I'm honestly glad you gave me a heads-up. Managed to save some energy for the later rounds and scrape back some points... I think."

As he opened his eyes and leaned forward to wolf down his ramen, it was my cue to start eating too.

"Thanks for the food, sis. Really needed that," he mumbled through a mouthful of noodles, shovelling them in so fast that my earlier squirrel analogy seemed even more fitting.

I was barely a quarter through my meal when Gabe finished, leaning back with a satisfied sigh. "Huff... That really hit the spot!"

He grinned at me. "Honestly? You landing a job at Shori's Noodles might be the best thing that's happened to us. Free, amazing ramen? That stuff's gold."

I couldn't help but laugh at his over-the-top praise, though I was secretly pleased he appreciated it.

"So, tell me about the dojo, Gabe," I prodded, eager to hear more about his session with Miss K.

I was also slightly anxious, hoping she hadn't mentioned anything about my "condition."

After all, she was the only person outside of my immediate family I'd somewhat opened up to about the System's odd effects on my life, even if she didn't know even a fraction of the whole story.

Gabriel, finally looking relaxed and somewhat satisfied, began detailing his experience at the Arkion Dojo just like I had done for him the previous day.

Unlike me, he had encountered only cybernetically enhanced students under Miss K's tutelage, which made sense in hindsight given the prevalence of cybernetic enhancements in our world; it was by far and away the most common physical enhancement.

For Gabriel, however, that simply meant that everyone was, at baseline, better than him in whatever cybernetic enhancements they had. Much like me, Gabriel was about as pure a human as you could be in a world like this—a neural link, neural interface and cybernetic eyes were all that we had.

His initial rounds were brutal.

"I got the absolute shit kicked out of me," he confessed, half-joking that he thought he was going to die, and even considered quitting altogether. Hearing this, I couldn't help but worry for him, but he quickly reassured me that Miss K's encouragement and tips helped him overcome these initial challenges.

That let me relax a bit, as I really didn't want to see my brother go against the Matriarch's wishes like this; Valeria would undoubtedly be "upset", to put it mildly, if he decided to flunk on the dojo sessions.

"I couldn't let myself get discouraged that easily; especially after my little sister had made it through a whole sesh," he said proudly, recounting how the later rounds went much better.

He even won a round towards the end, which seemed to have boosted his spirits significantly. "You should've seen Kouri's face when Sensei told him to ease up," he chuckled.

"It felt good to let some of that energy out. Mum was right to push me into this. It's making me tougher, not just an easy target out there. Can't always count on my little sis to bail me out whenever a group of scavs feels like they are bored, huh?"

He said it with a laugh, but I struggled to find it funny.

The memory of his previous near-death experience was still too vivid, and my inner rage toward the attackers hadn't cooled. Despite this, I forced a smile, not wanting to dampen his spirits as he seemed to be handling the aftermath far better than I might have in his place.

"Did Miss K mention me at all, by chance?" I probed casually, hoping to ensure there were no uncomfortable undercurrents brewing between us because of anything she might have inadvertently revealed that she shouldn't have.

Confiding in her had spiked my anxiety to levels I wasn't comfortable with, though I recognized it had probably been necessary at the time. Still, the nagging fear that she might slip up and say something that could lead a corporation right to my doorstep took up a constant slice of my mental bandwidth.

Gabriel pondered briefly before responding. "Yeah, she did mention you a bit. She figured out we were siblings from our files and commented that it seemed like I was the more cautious one."

He flashed a smug smile. "Guess we can't argue with that, huh?"

He was spot on; we *really* couldn't argue with that assessment, especially since Gabriel was blissfully unaware of the full extent of the dangers I navigated regularly.

Relieved that Miss K hadn't shared anything too personal, I relaxed and enjoyed the rest of Gabriel's dojo stories.

Towards the end of our conversation, Gabriel brought up something that piqued my interest as well. "We should try to get some of that medicine Sensei uses," he suggested. "Having some of that at home would really ease my mind about injuries. That stuff works wonders."

I could only nod in agreement.

After enduring Kenzie's relentless onslaught and still managing to stay upright till the very end, I knew firsthand how effective that medicine could be. Having some on hand would not only be practical but reassuring—not to mention it being potentially life-saving for my future Operator business.

It was definitely only thanks to the medical supplies Miss K provided us that I'd made it through my dojo session somewhat intact—supplies I'd meant to check on after getting discharged from the hospital, which had been forgotten amid the chaos of losing an eye.

"You think I could ask Valeria to get some for us? If I say it's for session after-care or something...?" I pondered aloud, seeking Gabriel's insight. He knew Valeria far better than I did, having been around her much longer.

His eyes widened, genuine surprise crossing his face. "Wait, what? *You*, asking Mum for something?"

He shook his head, chuckling a bit. "Right, you've changed. Still tough to get used to, sorry, Sera... Uh, about your question, I honestly don't know. You've never really asked Mum for anything... The first time was at the last family dinner, talking about the dojo, and that went pretty well. But I'm not sure how she'd react normally, I'll be real..."

I sighed, once again struck by how little I actually knew about the original Sera's dynamics within our family. The broad strokes were clear, but the nuanced details—the ones that shaped day-to-day interactions—remained utterly elusive.

While I could press Gabriel for a comprehensive breakdown, not only would it take a massive amount of time, but it also risked overlooking key elements that were crucial to understanding the full picture. Plus, it wasn't like he had all the answers about everything that had transpired between original Sera and Valeria.

"What if we ask together, then?" I offered, not wanting to dwell on the matter for too long. All I cared about for now was potentially getting my hands on better quality medicine than what I could currently produce with my [Medicine] Skills and a can of spray-bandages for my upcoming Tasks.

"Surely you wouldn't mind having some extras either, considering how busy you are at work as well. Your body's probably going to be in a lot of pain tomorrow, if your current state is anything to go by, Gabe," I pushed further, really driving home the point that we should combine our efforts.

He winced, well aware of the aches that were probably on their way, then nodded in agreement. "Yeah... You're right. How about we bring it up at the next family dinner? Or should we just message her right now...?"

'Why the hell are you asking me, Gabe?! I have no idea how to deal with that woman?!' I internally groaned.

"Ehh... We could probably just send her a message... I think?" I answered, guessing that it wasn't really that big of a deal that it needed a face-to-face with the Matriarch, considering that it was really just a request for her to buy us some better quality medicine to recover from the Dojo she had pushed on us—or Gabriel, at least.

"Better if you do it, though," I quickly added. "Considering my history with her 'n' all."

“Yeah, probably best,” he chuckled, acknowledging the delicate balance with our mother. “No need to stir the pot more than we must, right?”

We went on to share a few more experiences of our Dojo visits over the next half an hour, before Gabriel announced that he’d take a quick shower and retire for bed. It was already quite late, all things considered and he’d have to go back to his double-shift work in the early morning hours of the next day already; regardless of how broken his body was at this stage.

‘Ah, the joys of capitalism... Work them to the bone for every last credit,’ I mused darkly as I readied myself for bed as well—not to sleep, but to dive back into Skill grinding.

Just as I had planned, I was going to spend the next eight-or-so hours with the digital avatar of Kill Joy guiding me further into the world of the faux-Cyberspace inside the shard; hopefully teaching me a lot of invaluable tips and tricks for my upcoming real-Cyberspace adventures...

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By the time a floating alarm appeared in front of my digital avatar, signalling the arrival of morning, I had nearly forgotten that I wasn’t actually in the real world.

Disconnecting from the faux-Cyberspace took a solid minute as I reoriented myself, having merged with the digital realm for over eight hours, which left my brain a bit scrambled.

As I pulled my consciousness back into my real body and away from the SPG-01 shard, I had to close my eyes for a moment to steady myself—the room seemed to spin as I readjusted to physical reality.

"Damn, it's a good thing I'm getting this practice in now, rather than when I'm trying to impress an Operator," I muttered under my breath, relieved that I had chosen to start honing my netrunning skills sooner rather than later.

This intensive session with Kill Joy in the faux-Cyberspace had proven invaluable, however, not just for experiencing first-hand what netrunner burnout felt like and in terms of progress I had made in the shard’s guided sections overall. I was likely only around 5-10 hours away from finishing the module, instead of the 20-30 I had thought were left over earlier in the day—[Programming Maestro] was really paying massive dividends already.

The session had also been incredibly successful in amassing a wealth of experience points for my netrunning-related Skills—well, all except for [Manifestation], that is.

Opening up the stored up System Notifications to bask in the pure bliss of numbers going brrr, I couldn’t hide a massive smile—not that I even tried to, I had earned this one fair and square.

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

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

[System]: 1,400xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.

[System]: [Netrunning] has reached Level 3. Gained one [Netrunning] Perk Point.

[System]: 1,100xp gained for [Quick-Hacks] Skill.

[System]: *700xp gained for Intellect Attribute.*

[System]: *500xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

That's right; it was already time to choose another netrunning-related Perk; this time for [Netrunning] itself!

The 12+ hour marathon of spending time with Kill Joy today had really paid off, no matter how I looked at it. It was going to be a sad day, fairly soon, when I had finished all the guided sections of what the shard had to offer; it would undoubtedly crash my experience rate down by orders of magnitude.

Not only would I be losing out on the [Mentor Bonus] that Kill Joy's digital alter-ego provided, but his expertly crafted curriculum was also a large part of the reason my netrunning advancements over the last weeks had been so massive.

Once I had to figure out my own ways to gain experience, I was bound to have to spend multiple dozen hours to even find a path that would be consistent enough for me to consider a viable grind; simply doing push-ups in Cyberspace was not exactly going to work, after all.

Pulling up the Perk Selection screen for [Netrunning], I refreshed my memory on what exactly I had access to now.

[Echo Trap]

The cyberspace hunter-class Perk! You gain the ability to deploy quick-hack segments or subroutines as static traps directly in cyberspace, bypassing the need for any external devices for these tasks. These traps utilise and generate only a fraction—one tenth—of their typical RAM and heat when active. You can dismantle these traps remotely with a mental command, irrespective of your location or line of sight.

[Heat Dump]

Aggressively warm! You gain the ability to offload a portion of your accumulated neural-heat onto selected targets currently influenced by your quick-hacks within cyberspace. The efficiency of heat transfer and the capacity to target multiple adversaries are determined by the knowledge-level of the Skill.

[Cyberspace Thief]

Did that bitch just steal my subroutine?! You gain the ability to attempt and snatch a random quick-hack subroutine or segment from any target currently affected by one of your quick-hacks in cyberspace. To successfully annex these digital assets, your device must have sufficient storage space available—equal to or exceeding the quick-hack's size. Additionally, your system must have available current-capacity of at least half the necessary RAM and heat capacity for immediate use of the stolen quick-hack.

[Spectral Scanner]

*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.

As I scrutinised each available Perk carefully, I found myself as unsure as usual of the best path forward.

'Maybe I could get some advice from Kill Joy?' I briefly considered, pondering the feasibility of seeking guidance from my digital mentor; he wasn't a real person that could snitch on me, after all. However, I swiftly dismissed the idea, wary of the potential risks involved.

The training sessions within the shard might be monitored in some way, and I couldn't risk exposing my unique System access—especially not for something as "relatively" minor as selecting a Level 3 Perk.

If it had been a significant Level 10 Capstone Perk, perhaps the risk would be justified, but this was just the first-tier; definitely not worth the risk, however minor it might've been.

It seemed I was left to tackle this decision the old-fashioned way: Alone, weighing each option against my goals and the costs of foregoing the alternatives.

With a hint of exasperation colouring my thoughts, I let out a heavy sigh. *'Haa... Here I go again, trying to figure out what wrong decisions to make...'*