

## Chapter 38 - Entangling Web

The next morning unfolded at an energetic pace, as I dove headfirst into my established exercise routine.

It began with a session of [Contortion] training, a great way to limber up before the more intense physical activities. Then came my usual combination of running, sneaking, and jumping around the floor. To an onlooker, my antics might have seemed absurd, yet the effectiveness of this routine was indisputable.

After completing the exercise circuit, I returned to the apartment, ready for my habitual post-workout shower. It had become a part of my daily schedule, a refreshing routine I followed before heading out to assist Mr. Shori at his stall.

As I stepped into the shower, my thoughts turned to the System Notifications that had accumulated over the course of the morning.

Among the morning's achievements, one stood out prominently: I had discovered a way to get a comprehensive overview of all the System Notifications I received throughout the day.

This meant I could stay updated without the need to constantly check them as they arrived.

This discovery, made early in my stretching session, or as the System categorised it, [Contortion], had significantly boosted my motivation for the rest of my exercises, especially the jogging part.

'*Alright, let's see what we have here... There was quite a bit today,*' I thought to myself, a hint of excitement in my grin. Eagerly, I called up the list of notifications, curious to see the full extent of my morning's achievements.

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

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

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

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

[System]: *800xp (+400xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 500xp.*

[System]: *Body Attribute has reached 4.*

[System]: *600xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *800xp (+400xp Bonus) gained for [Stealth] Skill. Available Bonus left: 100xp.*

[System]: *300xp gained for Edge Attribute.*

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

[System]: *[Acrobatics] Skill has reached Level 1.*

That's right.

The moment I achieved a Body Attribute of 4 and unlocked the [Acrobatics] knowledge drop, I knew I had hit a significant milestone.

Unsurprisingly, I had even found a way to integrate [Acrobatics] into my morning runs without resorting to wild, erratic jumping—would you imagine that! A little System knowledge magic, and voilà—a more graceful and efficient training routine was born!

As I stood under the shower, letting the water cascade over me, I couldn't help but marvel at the improvement in my Body Attribute. The upgrade had kicked in right at the start of my run, and the difference in my physical capabilities was both astonishing and immensely satisfying.

What really took me by surprise, though, was the faint outline of muscles beginning to show on my stomach and arms. This was something I had never imagined seeing on myself, but there it was, clear evidence of my physical transformation. I wasn't exactly toned, but the foundation was undeniably there, however faint.

In just about two weeks, I had gone from a frail, post-coma state to this new level of fitness.

Although the pace of levelling up was slowing down markedly with each new level, making the next goal of Body 5 seem like a distant dream that was likely only possible in about as much time again or even more, the progress I had made was palpable.

I was officially above average in terms of physical prowess, a thought I never expected to entertain, let alone achieve.

And then there was the [Acrobatics] Skill.

The knowledge drop had provided me with a foundational understanding of acrobatics, much like a crash course into the world of fluid and dynamic movement. It covered essential techniques and principles, transforming my approach to physical movement and balance.

One of the first concepts I had learned during the download was the art of falling correctly.

This included techniques on how to roll upon impact to distribute force, reducing the risk of injury. It was more than just tucking and rolling; it involved understanding the physics of my body in motion, teaching me to use momentum to my advantage.

I also gained insights into the mechanics of jumping—not just the act of leaping into the air, but how to do so efficiently. This involved optimising my takeoff for height or distance, engaging the right muscle groups, and landing safely to minimise stress on my joints.

Rolling, another critical aspect of the skill, was more than a simple forward roll.

It encompassed various types of rolls used to navigate obstacles, maintain momentum, or transition into other movements seamlessly—almost like a cheap-man's version of parkour, which, aptly enough, was a Perk later down the line, once I reached Level 3 in [Acrobatics].

This knowledge was going to be particularly useful in situations where I needed to move quickly and fluidly over uneven terrain or through tight spaces.

The knowledge drop also introduced me to the basics of body control and balance.

This involved exercises and techniques to improve core strength, flexibility, and coordination. Such training was essential for more advanced acrobatic manoeuvres and for maintaining control during complex sequences of movements—basically an enhanced version of what the Reflex Attribute did for my whole body, but more focused.

Lastly, I learned about spatial awareness and precision in movement.

This aspect of the Skill helped me gauge distances accurately, move with purpose, and place my body exactly where it needed to be, when I needed it. Whether it was a precise jump or navigating through a cluttered space without touching anything, this knowledge was absolutely invaluable.

While I was still very far from being an Olympic-level athlete, I couldn't help but indulge in a bit of fanciful thinking. *'Maybe one day,'* I mused with a wry smile, feeling motivated and empowered by the progress I had made today.

I had also decided to start using my Bonus Experience on [Stealth], now that my Body had reached the rank that was most likely going to be my current limit, at least for a few weeks.

[Stealth], on the other hand, was going to be absolutely paramount in not just the upcoming missions that I had to complete for [Mr. Stirling's Task], but also my own list and anything else I wanted to tackle in this world going forward.

While I hadn't always been a fan of the stealth-archer approach in video games, real life was a whole different “game” altogether. The surest way to stay out of harm's way was to never even get into trouble to begin with.

And the best way to do that, was to not get seen in the first place.

More than once already, had I regretted not taking the [Ghost] Trait during my earlier Trait selection in the recent days, ever since [Mr. Shori's Task] had me wading into the den of the lion, so to speak. However, the [Blademaster] and [Polyglot] Traits had already proven their worth as well, with [Polyglot] being particularly invaluable, which made it hard to be too upset about my initial choices.

[Polyglot] had unequivocally been a fantastic choice, in hindsight.

It had helped me ingratiate myself with both Mr. Shori and Misha so far and it was likely only going to become more and more important, the more I delved into the greater world of Neon Dragons outside Delta, where cultural- and language-specific districts were more of a norm than a rarity.

Shaking off the indulgence of nostalgia and my deep dive into System Notifications, I realised it was time to switch gears. "Okay, let's get moving. There's much to do at Mr. Shori's, and Mr. Stirling's task isn't going to complete itself," I thought, injecting a bit of pep-talk to propel myself out of the steamy comfort of the shower.

Quickly, I dressed in my typical work attire, a blend of practicality and ease, perfect for a day that promised to be both busy and unpredictable. Just as I was about to step out the door, a prudent thought struck me.

"Better take the knife," I murmured to myself, recalling the sleek RaZ Mk. 2 now in my possession. Considering the unpredictability of life in the Mega Buildings, being armed felt more like a necessity than an option, especially after what had happened to Gabriel.

In these parts, it wasn't unusual to see individuals sporting various types of armaments, from knives to guns. Therefore, strapping a knife to my back wouldn't make me an outlier either.

I retreated to my room and grabbed the sheath Misha had provided, complete with its versatile straps. Initially, I had planned to keep the knife at my side in a classic holster style, but I quickly realised the value of customizable carrying options. At Mr. Shori's stall, a waist-strapped knife could be cumbersome, so positioning it on my lower back, angled for a swift left-handed draw, seemed the ideal setup.

I couldn't help but mentally thank Misha for her foresight in providing such adaptable gear. "Ela will be back to see you soon, Misha," I thought, half-jokingly trying to send my gratitude through some imaginary psychic connection. Her assistance had already proven invaluable.

Feeling prepared and secure with my knife in place, I finally left the apartment and made my way down to Mr. Shori's stall, ready to face whatever the day had in store...

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PoV: Jade

Jade's task, which had been handed down from Vega personally, was shaping up to be an absolute nightmare. The assignment was to subtly track and gather intelligence on someone that even Vega potentially considered his equal in skill and cunning.

What had truly thrown Jade off balance, however, was the fact that her target was around her own age.

"This is just absurd. There's no way she's that good," she muttered under her breath repeatedly since the assignment began. Her scepticism had been high at first, but as days passed, Jade was forced to acknowledge that Vega's evaluation might have been spot-on.

Her target wasn't just any regular individual; she had the means to access restricted floors.

The extent of this access was still a mystery to Jade, who hadn't yet managed to unravel just how deep her target's privileges ran—was it just a single floor or a host of them? Unlike her target, Jade had no such access, complicating her surveillance efforts significantly.

To Jade's initial relief, the target frequently visited the 16th floor, working shifts at "Shori Noodles"—a quaint eatery under their newest client's ownership.

This opportunity seemed like a silver lining, a chance for Jade to observe her quarry up close.

But what initially seemed like an advantage rapidly devolved into a convoluted mess. Trying to decipher the target's motives and character from these visits was like navigating a labyrinth while blindfolded and drugged.

Jade had made several attempts, each more earnest than the last.

She had watched, analysed, and tried to understand, yet each observation session left her with more questions than answers. The target's behaviour, actions, and even mundane interactions seemed to be enshrouded in layers of complexity that Jade had been struggling to peel back even a single layer of.

She was finding her mission increasingly frustrating, as her allocated resources were rapidly depleting with little to show for it. The elusive "Ela" continued to evade her understanding, and the first personal assignment Vega had ever entrusted her with, seemed to be slipping through her fingers, despite her best efforts.

Initially, she had recruited fellow members of the Clawed Beasts to assist in tracking Ela's movements. However, their efforts had proven largely futile.

Ela's visits to the 16th floor were brief and elusive, and once she entered the restricted elevators, it was as if she vanished into thin air. The collective surveillance efforts had yielded practically nothing of value.

Switching tactics, Jade then resorted to more direct observation.

She had people trail Ela more closely, even going as far as to have several members eat at the stall every day to keep a watchful eye on her at all times, hoping to gather some clue, any insight into her target's purpose and personality.

But Ela's time at Shori's Noodles didn't reveal anything extraordinary either.

Her activities were mundane, almost disappointingly so: chopping algae, preparing broth, and honing knives. Nothing that hinted at the exceptional skills Vega had suggested.

This lack of progress was exasperating.

Here she was, handed a mission directly by Vega, a task he categorised under his third highest tier of priorities, and yet she was coming up empty. She had expected challenges, certainly, but the utter lack of progress was something else entirely.

Yesterday's operation, however, had been the most taxing yet for Jade and had nearly made her quit the assignment altogether.

After days of meticulous tracking, she had pinpointed the approximate time her target, Ela, frequented the 16th floor. The pattern was consistent enough for Jade to stage a calculated disturbance.

The motive behind this was simple but crucial: Vega had hinted at Ela's peculiar sensitivity towards acts of physical violence. This information was the cornerstone of Jade's plan.

She orchestrated a dramatic scene, one that would resonate deeply with any young woman witnessing it—a staged abduction of a young girl, executed in broad daylight.

The scenario was chosen for its emotional impact, something that Jade believed would surely provoke a significant reaction from Ela.

The participants in this charade were locals—beggars who, Jade knew, wouldn't be missed or questioned in the aftermath, regardless of Ela's potential response.

Furthermore, the girl playing the victim was a member of the Clawed Beasts, well-versed in their operations. This ensured that even if Jade lost track of Ela during the chaos, they would still gather valuable information based on Ela's actions or lack thereof.

Jade had considered every angle—even Ela's possible indifference to the staged incident would be telling. Inaction, after all, could be as revealing as action in the right context.

However, despite Jade's meticulous planning and calculated execution, the outcome was far from what she had anticipated.

The unfolding of events did not align with any of Jade's predictions, leaving her with an unsettling feeling of uncertainty and apprehension. The incident had not only failed to yield the desired insights into Ela's character but had instead plunged Jade into a whirlpool of anxiety.

The aftermath had left her restless, robbing her of sleep, instead leaving her to calculate her next moves in this increasingly complex web of espionage that her target had spun for her.

She had meticulously set up what she thought was a foolproof scenario, only to find Ela not only seeing through the charade with an unnerving clarity but also subtly warning Jade against orchestrating such events in the future. The revelation had sent chills down Jade's spine, forcing her to reevaluate her approach and the enigma that was Ela.

Jade remembered with a shiver the conversation she had with the beggar, briefly after everything had gone awry.

His words had been enthusiastic yet laced with an undercurrent of awe. "Oh, that's her name?! Ela? She's something else," he had exclaimed, his eyes widening with respect. "She handed me a stack of creds—way more than what you gave, no offence. And there was a note too!"

Curiosity piqued, Jade had reluctantly paid extra to have the beggar read out the note, a decision that had left her shaken.

The message was simple yet loaded with implications: "Evening the scales."

The phrase echoed in Jade's mind, a veiled but unmistakable warning. It implied a balance of actions and consequences, suggesting that any future attempts to provoke Ela might be met with a direct and equal response—a clear warning and threat alike.

The gravity of this realisation weighed heavily on Jade.

The note hinted at a level of awareness and capability that went beyond Jade's initial assessment—maybe even Vega's too. This wasn't just a mere warning; it was a clear message that Ela was not one to be trifled with lightly.

Jade couldn't shake off the feeling that she was dealing with someone far more formidable than she had anticipated, someone who could not only decipher her schemes but also respond with a subtle yet powerful message of their own.

Her concern only deepened as the beggar had continued his narrative.

Ela's seemingly altruistic act of instructing him to "Pay it forward" wasn't just about spreading goodwill; it was a calculated move to ensure Jade received a message.

"She was all about passing on the kindness," the beggar had explained with a grateful smile. "Told me to spread the word about her generosity, you see? If you do meet her, let her know I'm thankful, will you?"

But Jade saw right through the thinly veiled facade.

This wasn't about Ela seeking praise or adulation; it was a clever way of communicating directly with Jade, a reminder of Ela's perceptiveness and a nudge for Jade to rethink her strategies.

Restless and uneasy, Jade spent the night devising a new approach, one that bordered on the risky and went against Vega's cardinal rule: "Never conduct your investigations personally."

This rule was a cornerstone of survival in their line of work and something that Vega had drilled into her mind since the very day he had taken her in. After all, the fastest way for somebody to die in this world, was to get noticed by the wrong people.

Yet, she felt cornered into taking this perilous, forbidden step.

Ela had proven too astute, too aware for any indirect method to yield results. The only viable way to gauge Ela's true nature and intentions, Jade had reluctantly concluded, was to engage with her face-to-face.

As she steeled herself for the day ahead, Jade clung to a faint hope that her identity remained a secret, that Ela hadn't yet connected her to the orchestrated events.

"Maybe she'll just think it's all Vega's shadowplay," Jade whispered to herself, a mixture of hope and dread simmering within her as she prepared to encounter Ela once again and meet her face-to-face for the very first time.

Her plan, fraught with tremendous risk and the potential for dire consequences, was a gamble she felt forced to take. Failure was no longer an option—not only would it mean disappointing Vega, but it would also mark a serious breach of his teachings, with nothing to show for it.

Jade knew that the stakes were high, and she had to succeed at all costs, as she fixed her eyes onto the restricted elevator doors in the distance...

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Exiting the restricted elevator, a sense of unease clung to me, the remnants of yesterday's troubling event still casting a shadow over my thoughts. Part of me yearned to erase the memory, while another insisted on learning from it, ensuring it didn't go unnoticed.

Instinctively, my hand drifted towards the sheath at my back, a silent reassurance as I wove through the bustling crowd, my gaze scanning the sea of faces. I was on the lookout for any sign of yesterday's beggar, the young girl, or any hint of their presence, but my search was fruitless.

*'Let it go, Sera. You couldn't have changed what happened, and dwelling on it won't help anyone.'* I silently reasoned with myself, striving to balance the emotional turmoil with a dose of practicality. But even as I attempted to focus my mind, the incident lingered, a stubborn echo in my consciousness.

With a deep breath, I reminded myself of the larger tasks at hand, the pressing responsibilities that demanded my attention over the next few hours.

Approaching Mr. Shori's stall, my tension gradually eased, and my posture relaxed.

The row of beggars faded from my view, and with it, my hand instinctively moved away from the knife's sheath. A newfound understanding dawned on me: The readiness to draw my weapon had been a source of comfort in navigating the unpredictable streets this morning and was likely going to be in the future as well.

As I entered the back of the stall, I was met with Mr. Shori's startled and slightly irate expression, "Who you? What you do in back? This is Shori's—Huh? Ela?" His words tumbled out in rapid succession, halting abruptly as recognition dawned in his eyes.

"New hair! Look very good! Also definitely no stick. You strong now?" He queried, his gaze examining me as though I were one of his carefully selected batches of algae.

His English, fragmented yet earnest, added a familiar charm to his inquiry. "I approve! Ela good recovery!" he finally declared, his thumb raised in his usual gesture of approval and encouragement.

His reaction, a mix of surprise and genuine delight, brought a smile to my face, reminding me of the small joys to be found in this world. It wasn't all bad on the 16th floor, after all.

"Thank you, Mr. Shori," I responded, my face brightening with a sincere smile.

His was the first recognition of my new hairstyle outside of Valeria's note; Gabriel and Oliver hadn't seemed to notice, too worn down by their respective days.



"I thought it was time to sort out that mess of hair. And Mr. Shori, your recommendation for Misha's Emporium was spot on. She was absolutely amazing. I got everything I needed, and then some!"

A look of pleased surprise crossed Mr. Shori's face, followed by a nod of understanding. "Yes, Misha very kind. Good vendor. Strange, but great goods," he agreed, his voice tinged with a note of fondness.

Then, lowering his voice and leaning in, he switched to Japanese for a moment, sharing a secret. "{You know, between you and me, I had no idea Misha was a woman. Gryplik are quite a fascinating species, aren't they? I can't tell much about them, but their merchandise is the real deal.}"

Acknowledging his remark with an affirmative nod, I slipped into the apron and hairnet he'd laid out for me, as was our routine each morning. The ritual familiarity of it all brought a comforting sense of normalcy to the start of my day.

As Mr. Shori returned to his work at the front of the stall, I started with my day's usual tasks: Cutting algae, preparing broth and sharpening knives that Mr. Shori handed to me...

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The day unfolded in its usual rhythm, and I found myself settling into the familiar pattern of the daily grind, my mind already plotting the steps I would take later.

*'After my shift, I'll grab my gear, the shard, and head to the 62nd floor. With all the details Mr. Stirling provided, locating the contact should be straightforward. I just hope they aren't too thrown off by my presence instead of Mr. Stirling's. But, I trust he's informed them ahead of time,'* I considered, mentally preparing for any unforeseen complications.

As I continued to ponder, Mr. Shori unexpectedly blocked my path, an intentional move I knew was out of the ordinary for him. When he started to speak in Japanese, it immediately grabbed my full attention; this too was something he didn't do without good reason.

"{There's a young girl outside. She looks starving and sleep-deprived, just like you were when we first met. Prepare a meal for her—one like those you make for yourself to take home. I'll manage the stall while you're away. Be as kind as you can; we don't know her story,}" he said, his voice imbued with the same compassion that he had shown me, the first time I had met him.

His heartfelt request was one I couldn't ignore.

With a nod, I set about preparing the meal swiftly and efficiently. By now, I had become quite adept at creating a generous serving of Mr. Shori's signature algae ramen, Sera style, even if I wasn't quite bold enough to claim mastery over his recipe. In my hands, the ingredients mingled, not yet perfect, but with each day's practice, I was inching closer.

After finishing the meal, I stepped from the stall's back into the bustling front area.

My gaze swept over the patrons and those waiting, searching for the girl Mr. Shori described.

Despite his vague details, identifying a young girl around my age, half-starved and sleep-deprived, amidst the crowd shouldn't be too difficult.

It turned out that my intuition had been correct moments later.

'*Ah, there she is,*' I realised, spotting her among the bustling crowd near the busy main road.

The moment our eyes met, hers widened with unmistakable terror. It was a raw, unguarded fear that spoke volumes of her experiences.

'*What could she have possibly endured to react so fearfully to a random stranger's approach?*' I wondered, empathising deeply with her plight.

Her reaction, so steeped in dread, triggered unwelcome echoes of my own school days, a time when every social interaction had felt like an insult, a mockery of my very existence.

There she stood, frozen in place, her gaze locked onto me.

Her eyes, wide and brimming with fear, seemed to search for a threat or perhaps a glimmer of kindness in mine. It was a look that resonated with my own past, a reflection of the vulnerabilities I had once harboured and would have rather entirely forgotten about.

Still, I approached her gently, extending the steaming bowl of ramen as a peace offering.

"It's free, *really*," I reassured her with a smile, trying to dispel her obvious fear. "Mr. Shori believes in the old helping the young. He asked me to come out and help you. Would you like to sit down and eat?"

She regarded me with suspicion, her eyes shifting from the ramen back to my face.

I held the bowl steadily, now only a few metres away.

In her gaze, I saw reflections of my own past struggles, a mirror of sorts. It struck me, the similarity in our eyes—mine a deep emerald green, hers a lighter shade, reminiscent of jade stones...