

Chapter Sixteen

-Preparations-

Kōhai? I blinked in surprise.

Naturally, I was familiar with the Japanese term. It was used to refer to a junior in a group, such as an underclassmen, but it was weird suddenly hearing it out of the blue. Maybe it shouldn't be, considering how many Japanese terms had been adapted in Arcadia, and Magical Girls *were* kind of made popular, if not started, in Japan. In a way, it also was accurate. We were both Magical Guardians, and I was newer than him, so...

Wait, did he just say "adorable" kōhai?

"But where are my manners?" he interrupted my flustered thoughts. "I go by Error Machina, or just Error for short. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Oh, I'm-" I began to give a quick bow of my head.

[Apologies,] Selene smoothly cut in. [But my Magical Girl is currently untransformed and without a codename. Perhaps a name can be excluded for now?]

He winced, quickly nodding his assent.

"Of course. My bad, I should have been thinking about that. Give me a second, I'm going to ensure our conversation stays private."

He reached into the air, and a green, semi-transparent rectangle appeared. I could vaguely make out buttons almost like those on a keyboard, and his fingers wove across it, dancing so quickly I couldn't follow any of the individual movements. With a final, flourishing button press, the holographic keyboard disappeared, and the already blurry background behind him suddenly became completely shrouded as if a thick film had fallen over it.

"There we go. I'm at Guardian Command right now working with a few other Guardians and a bunch of operators, so I put up a privacy shell. We should be able to have a conversation now without having to worry about any accidental eavesdropping."

[That is much appreciated,] Selene paused for a moment, her tails twitching. [I do not mean to be rude, but I would like to insist on the specifics of this conversation being kept as secret as possible and I would like to ask for your oath to-]

He held up a hand, cutting Selene off. A gentle and almost amused smile stretched across his lips.

“Let me be clear, I do this kind of thing to *help* people, and I regard helping newbies a sacred task. So not only do I swear upon my Soul Gem that I will provide assistance while keeping specific details regarding you completely confidential, but I am also happy to inform you the System has given me a few *significant* quests to help you out. Does that help inform your decision?”

[Indeed it does,] Selene’s tails loosened in relief. [I thank you for your understanding. Before we discuss anything else, perhaps it would be best if we got an update on the situation in Arcadia as a whole and whether rescue will be possible for the shelter on the third floor of our building.]

Error nodded a few times, and as his hands moved, the holographic keyboard reappeared. Watching his fingers move was *weird*. It wasn’t just that they moved so fast that they were practically a blur, it was almost as if I was watching *multiple* versions of his hands work at the same time. What I could only describe as transparent after-images moved completely unsynchronized with one another in a hazy mirage of motion.

I turned my eyes away from the headache inducing image to face Selene.

“What did he mean by ‘I swear on my Soul Gem?’”

[It is the most binding oath a Guardian can give without signing a direct Geas. If he were to break his word, he would lose points and a massive amount of experience, most likely resulting in the loss of multiple levels. A portion of that penalty would be transferred to you along with a notification he had broken his word.]

My eyes widened in surprise, but before I could remark, Error turned back to us, his face somber.

“So... I assume these two officers—hello again, by the way—have already informed you of the overall situation?”

“Arcadia was hit by multiple Usurpations at the same time, right?” I responded.

“Yup. Dozens of them. As far as that situation is concerned... Well, the good news is we have yet to encounter anything stronger than our strike teams, and all of the newest gen Guardians registered for the academy have been accounted for. Naturally, we’ve advised them not to

engage, and most seem to be listening. Even those who aren't are sticking to the non-combat roles, thanks to the quests the System sent out."

He let out a sigh, leaning back in his chair and tapping his desk in a slow metronome. Before I could ask what "academy" he was talking about, he continued.

"We've also managed to recall some forces from the mainlands, giving us almost eight hundred Guardians working together to clear Arcadia. That, of course, doesn't account for all our Magical Soldiers, and even the Inquisitors are putting in work."

Eight hundred!? My eyes bulged at the number. I had no idea how many Magical Girls normally called Arcadia their home, but that seemed like a *lot*. Error must have noticed my expression, because a corner of his mouth quirked upward in amusement.

"Unfortunately, completely clearing Arcadia is going to be a multi-day endeavor considering how urban it is," he shrugged. "I mean, we're talking about practically going door by door or, at the very least, having Guardians with advanced detection capabilities sweep through areas. The last thing we want is to leave an Anathema behind and risk them creating a nest and starting a Rebellion."

He gave a shudder, and Selene glanced at me.

[Rebellions are much more dangerous than a normal Usurpation. Instead of opening a rift from their side, the Anathema create one from this reality. It lets them bring in stronger forces from the beginning, and with a nest, they already have a base of operations to form more Anathema.]

"Which is exactly why we have to be so thorough in cleaning them out." Error agreed. "As for your Usurpation... Well, the biggest problem is that the Anathema are fighting tooth and nail around the perimeter of your area, and without the shield generator active, they're able to constantly get more reinforcements. Getting through them is going to take a lot of time and manpower. With that in mind, the higher ups in Guardian Command made the decision to focus on clearing the other Usurpations first. That, of course, is going to take days to properly do."

A spark of anger flared in my chest at the implications, and I found myself clenching my hands painfully tight.

"So nobody's coming?" I blurted out, unable to help myself. "What about all the people in the shelter who are going to die in a few hours? They just get... sacrificed?"

He was silent for a long moment, the tapping of his fingers disappearing as he stared at me. I wasn't entirely sure where my anger stemmed from, but it gave me the courage to meet his gaze unflinchingly. Eventually, he let out a long, tired sigh.

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, that is exactly what it means. Clearing a path to evacuate them would take significant resources and might give time for other Usurpations to grow drastically worse. Command has decided that in the long run, it might end up costing more lives than it saves."

"If we could just deactivate the shelter's emergency shield, this wouldn't be a problem," Sergeant O'Malley murmured thoughtfully. "But unless I'm mistaken, it requires a physical key."

"That's correct," Error winced. "Deactivating an emergency shield requires both an authorized person and the unlocking key that can only be made at Guardian Command. It's a failsafe to prevent any Guardians from trying to rescue a shelter without proper preparation and resources. Unfortunately, that works against us in this case as I have no way of getting it to you safely."

"What about sending a Magical Girl or MS team to restart the generator?" Ji-woo asked. "Is that an option?"

"They wouldn't be able to make it through the perimeter," Error shook his head. "Some of the stealthier Girls might be able to do it, but they're all busy popping the nests beginning to spring up. It was one of the first things I checked when you guys contacted me earlier."

There was a silence after that, and I felt Error's eyes move to me speculatively. Nobody said anything, and I swallowed as my heart started pounding faster.

"But..." I shifted my weight uncomfortably. "What if there was a Magical Girl already in the zone who could restart the mana generator?"

Error's eyes shone, and a grin spread across his face.

"Oh? Now *that* just might be possible. I didn't want to say anything to make you feel forced, but yes. You could pretty much do it without a problem, even being level one. Besides, if you use your Familiar as a scout, you can easily avoid anything that might be too strong, and with most of the higher level Anathema being sent to the perimeter-

[I apologize for interrupting,] Selene said, her voice weirdly flat. [But this is where I must inform you of the things requiring your secrecy. First and foremost, the reason we are talking now is because we had to fight our way down to this shelter due to the third floor's shelter being

sealed off. That being said, I also must inform you this was an emergency contract, and... Blacklight Protocols are in effect.]

Error froze, the smile draining from his face. Slowly, his hands clenched into fists on the table. I could see fury flash across his eyes in a deep, blazing inferno that transformed his face into a venomous glare. The sudden shift of emotion combined with the pure rage he radiated made me flinch, my instincts screaming at me. Reflexively, I looked down to the table in front of me, forcing myself to be as still and small as possible as I bowed my head. My heart raced, and I desperately tried to figure out what had suddenly set Error off. “Blacklight Protocols” sounded familiar, but...

Wait, I *had* heard the phrase before. Right after I’d done my contract, part of the message that appeared in my head said my Astral Shift was locked because “Blacklight Protocols were in effect.” In the chaos, I’d never gotten around to asking Selene about it or any of the other things that message had mentioned. Although, with how evasive she’d been about telling me why I couldn’t use my transformation, I doubted I would have gotten an answer. Still, I found myself desperately wishing I knew *why* Error had suddenly seemed so angry at me.

A frustrated sigh finally broke the silence, and my muscles tightened painfully in anticipation.

“Officers,” Error said crisply. “I am going to request you wait outside of the room while I discuss some things with my kōhai. Consider this an order, if you must.”

Sergeant O’Malley gave a salute and immediately moved to leave. Ji-woo gave me a concerned look and opened her mouth as if to say something.

“I assure you, officer,” Error said, his voice glacial, “she is not in trouble. We simply have to discuss some things only Guardians have proper clearance for.”

Ji-woo didn’t seem completely mollified, but she gave a hesitant nod to him regardless. Shooting me one last look, she left the room. There was another long silence, and then I heard a loud slam.

“Goddamnit...” Error growled, and I risked looking back up at him.

There was a hunch to his shoulders as he ran a hand through his hair, and something about his eyes gave him a tired, frustrated look. He paused halfway through the motion, tilting his head as if listening to something. His eyes suddenly widened as he looked back up at me. I flicked my gaze back down quickly, hoping he didn’t notice.

“*Shit*, I mean, um, crap. I’m sorry, I’m not mad at you, and I didn’t mean to scare you. I just... I have some idea of what you might have been through, not having your Astral Shift, and even just that much is enough to make me furious... especially when all of this could so *easily* have been avoided.”

There was a bitterness dripping from his words, but none of it seemed directed at me. Slowly, I looked back up at him with a held breath. Error had a weak smile on, and he gave me a nod of reassurance.

[I have had to skip telling her many things in order to prioritize what is directly related to her survival,] Selene’s tails curled downward. [She is unaware of information regarding the “Basic” section of her status, why she can’t transform, and what exactly these Blacklight Protocols are. I have, however, made it clear I am keeping this information secret in order to let her focus on the immediate situation. I ask that you honor my decision.]

“Of course,” he sighed, sounding tired as he rubbed his eyes. “That... that makes sense. Okay. So you can’t utilize your Astral Shift, but you still made it to the first floor shelter? First of all, that’s really impressive. I imagine that can’t have been easy.”

[It was not, and we had a child with us.]

“And you did an escort mission?” he chuckled, a glint of light returning to his eyes. “Now *that* goes beyond just impressive. You’ve got me curious what sort of tactics you’re using now, but I won’t pry. Still... You’re going to get so many rewards when this is all over.”

I raised an eyebrow, and Selene turned to answer.

[Due to Usurpation zones cutting off most communication, active contact with the System can not be safely maintained. Excluding major milestones or events such as your contract ceremony, you are cut off from receiving System updates such as quests, which, just like in games, are missions you can take for rewards.]

“But...” I frowned. “Then how have I been summoning things? How am I even getting points for defeating Anathema if none of the information is being sent out?”

“Clever girl!” Error interjected with a grin, making me jump. “Most don’t even think of that. The simple answer is that when you summon, you actually use some of your mana to send the ‘message’ of what you need. For lower tier items, it doesn’t amount to much more than one or two mana per summon, but some of the more advanced technology or more expensive items can

take a healthy chunk. Basically, the mana you spend is used for punching a hole through the Usurpation zone to get the item sent to you.”

[Your Contract Ceremony released a burst of mana as your Soul Gem formed, allowing you to get System and Gate access in the first place. It is also why you were immediately rewarded for your actions prior to becoming a Guardian. As for the point rewards, your Soul Gem is capable of processing such things and issuing rewards without directly accessing the System. It is sort of like having a computer but no access to the internet: You have many capabilities, but some advanced functions require information not stored locally.]

Error blinked at that, his mouth opening and closing a few times.

“That’s... I’m actually going to steal that explanation from now on. I could tell you all about *how* your Soul Gem actually analyzes those things, but that’s a little off topic. The point is, once you leave the Usurpation zone, the System is going to dump a bunch of points on you for your achievements. It’s sort of the System’s way of saying you did what it would normally qualify as a quest, but it wasn’t able to give you one.”

I nodded thoughtfully. It was still strange to be applying so many game concepts to the real world, but in a way it also made things... simpler.

“Anyway,” Error said, the grin fading from his face. “The generator. Without your Astral Shift, you’re missing out on... a lot. With your Familiar and Gate, you can probably still manage it depending on what you’re using as a weapon, but it’s going to be a lot tougher. You *should* still be operating within relatively safe danger margins, but nothing is ever certain in this line of work. So, let me ask you: Are you sure you want to do this?”

He looked at me with an uncomfortable intensity, and I shifted my weight slightly.

“If I do nothing, hundreds of people die,” I shrugged.

“That would *not* be your fault,” he said pointedly. “And nobody could blame you for trying to stay safe. Especially not with... everything you’ve probably been through.”

I looked at him blankly, then slowly shook my head. Plenty of people *could* and would blame me. Even if nobody found out, it wouldn’t change that it would be my fault for doing nothing when I could. More than anything, *I* would blame myself. Besides, both he and Selene seemed to think that I’d be safe so long as Selene was scouting ahead. How could I possibly *refuse* to go?

“I’m doing this,” I told him firmly. “I just... I just need to know if there’s anything else Selene and I should know.”

He gave me a long look before letting out his breath.

“Well, there’s not much more I can tell you. The mana generator really *shouldn’t* have gone offline in the first place, but once you turn it back on, the shield station should automatically recognize it has power again and begin restarting. When that happens, it’s going to start drawing up a ton of mana, and the Anathema are going to flock to it like a beacon, including the high level ones on the perimeter. This shouldn’t be a problem for you considering the mall’s shielding station is on the top floor. In fact, it will give you a nice, clear path back to the shelter as all the Anathema leave their positions. You’ll have five minutes before the shield goes up and they return to their original spots.”

I nodded. That was good to know. If I gave the Anathema in the basement a minute or two to head upwards, I’d be able to make it back to the shelter without worrying about any encounters whatsoever.

“As for any other advice... Well, your Familiar is more aware of your capabilities and circumstances, so I’m assuming she’ll have a few ideas. Other than that... just be safe. I feel bad that I wasn’t able to give you the whole new Magical Girl talk, but we can save that for later... Oh, I know! You should start thinking of your Magical Girl name! I can’t go around calling you kōhai all the time. A lot of Magical Girls like more flowery names, but anything is on the table, really. I don’t suppose you have any ideas yet, do you? Or themes?”

“Not really,” I shook my head. “But Selene has been putting an outline of a bunny head with a crescent moon on everything I’ve summoned.”

He barked out a laugh, and I looked up in surprise.

“Moon Rabbit?” he grinned. “That could work, even if *Sailor Moon* already did an obvious reference with the main character. Hmm... Maybe Lunar Rabbit? Luna? Lunaria? Or something a little darker. Eclipse? That might be too edgy considering how you look, though...”

He snapped his fingers, eyes glittering as he pointed to me with a big grin.

“Moon Bunny! You know, because bunnies are smaller, cuter rabbits.”

“I-I’ll think about it,” I hurriedly said, cheeks warming up. Somehow, I was getting the same vibes Lily gave off when she started teasing me, and I had a feeling he would keep going if I didn’t stop him.

“Whatever you say, Shadow Bunny. Night Rabbit. Moonlight.”

“I should really get going,” I looked for an obvious “off” button as my cheeks burned.

“Right,” he gave me one last sly grin. “See you soon, Dark Rabbit.”

With that, his feed cut off, and I let out a sigh of relief.

[That went most excellent!] Selene declared. [Now we can move on to final preparations before departure. Among those, I suggest developing a cover story with Sergeant O’Malley and Ji-woo that will let you leave and return to the shelter unnoticed. Before that, however, we should discuss what to spend your stat and reward points on.]

I gave Selene a nod, removing my eyepatch. I blinked a few times as my HUD flared back to life in my vision. Scrutinizing it for a moment, I found myself frowning. Something about it felt a little off to me, like it didn’t quite look right.

“Selene, can I customize my HUD’s layout?”

[Indeed. Simply focus on it with a small effort of will, and the changes should take place.]

I scrunched my nose in concentration, doing as she said, and then blinked as my HUD briefly flickered out before returning in the pattern I’d been thinking of... Except it also had a few additions I *hadn’t* intended.

Now, in the top left of my vision was a long red bar with a slightly shorter blue one underneath. The red one had “80%” written in the middle of it while the blue one had “300/300.” Both bars were anchored to a sphere in the very corner of my vision with a crescent moon symbol in its center along with the number four.

In the top right, a semi-transparent circle appeared, and the mini-map bloomed within, showing the layout of the shelter I’d been through so far. A small purple arrow marked my position, and a blue dot next to it seemed to show where Selene was.

Satisfied with the changes, I walked over to where I'd set my gun down and picked it up. Once my hand closed around it, an outline of its shape appeared in the lower right of my vision, along with "0/15" next to it.

I wasn't completely set on the design yet, but it seemed better than before. All I'd really changed was moving my health and mana bars to the upper left while getting rid of the body outline showing where I had been injured. It felt sort of unnecessary considering I would already *know* where I was injured if it did happen. I was a little unsure why the sphere with the "4" and crescent moon symbol had appeared, though, as it wasn't something I'd been actively trying to add even if it did look nice.

Weirdly, some other small cosmetic changes to the HUD seemed to have happened as well, like how the outlines making up the health and mana bars seemed to be a smoother, more polished texture instead of the simple flat lines they used to be.

"Selene, why did my HUD make some changes I didn't intend?"

[Your HUD is an Augment granted by your Aspect, an integral part of what makes you a Magical Girl. As such, it seems reasonable that your HUD would adjust itself as you grow into it, even if the changes do sometimes seem minor. I suppose you could say it is reacting to your subconscious, trying to figure out what aesthetics work best.]

I thought about that for a moment, before forcing myself to slowly accept the explanation. It was hardly the weirdest thing I'd experienced, but the idea that my subconscious was trying out different textures to find what was most visually pleasing felt... strange.

"Okay," I forced myself to move on with a small shake. "Next... my stat points."

Status, I thought, willing my status menu to appear.

STATUS	
Name: Mai Kuroki	Alias: None
Level: 4	Points: 137
Health: 80%	Mana: 300/300 (5/Min)
BASIC	
Origin: [Hidden]	Aspect: [Hidden]

Class: Locked	Signature: Unawakened
STATISTICS	
Strength: 10	Dexterity: 10
Vitality: 10	Agility: 10
Willpower: 30	Spirit: 1
30 Stat Points Available!	
PERMISSIONS	
GRIMOIRES / VAULTS	ABILITIES / AUGMENTS
ep707-174410-Go-nccer3	Demonic Eye of the Sable Waif [MAX]
First Aid Vault (Common)	
Kinetic Handguns (Common)	
INVENTORY	
WEAPONS	EQUIPMENT
Umbra P30 Model A - Enchanted	None

I looked over the menu, and after a moment shook my head. Again, I felt a weird sense that things weren't quite right. After taking a moment to organize my thoughts and make a few choices, I focused once again, willing the menu to change the same way I had for my HUD.

STATUS	
Name: Mai Kuroki	Alias: None
Level: 4	Points: 137
Health: 80%	Mana: 300/300 (5/Min)
BASIC	
Origin: [Hidden]	Aspect: [Hidden]
Class: Locked	Signature: Unawakened
STATS	

Strength: 10	Dexterity: 10
Vitality: 10	Agility: 10
Willpower: 30	Spirit: 1
30 Stat Points Available!	
SKILLS	
ABILITIES	AUGMENTS
	Demonic Eye of the Sable Waif [MAX]
PERMISSIONS	
VAULTS	GRIMOIRES
First Aid Vault (Common)	enjoy the ride to nether
Kinetic Handguns (Common)	

That seemed better. I'd removed the Inventory section as it seemed unnecessary, especially considering my HUD would tell me how much ammunition I had on me. In exchange, I made a Skills section to separate my Abilities and Augments into their own columns. I'd also separated the Grimoires and Vaults the same way under a Permissions section. I was a little worried about how long the status menu might get as I purchased more things, but it would work for now.

Happy with the new layout, my eyes flicked to my stats. Looking over each of them, I considered my options.

Strength was next to useless, considering I was using guns. Willpower and Spirit would also both be of limited help considering I wasn't using magic. Sure, I used one mana for every bullet I shot when I had the silencing enchantment active, but I had 300 mana with nothing else that would drain it except manifesting Selene.

That left Dexterity, Agility, and Vitality. My gun was Dexterity aligned, meaning the more points I put into the stat, the more powerful my gun would become. It would also make me better at aiming, reloading, and all the other finesse related things the Dexterity stat governed. Agility seemed equally important, making me and my reactions faster. Meanwhile Vitality would increase my physical resistances and overall health. Practically speaking, that probably meant I would be harder to hurt, and anything that did hurt me wouldn't cause as serious a wound.

But that assumes I'm getting hurt in the first place, which seems counterproductive...

The question, then, was how much I wanted to rely on dodging attacks, and how much Vitality I thought I might need “just in case.” It was unrealistic to expect me to dodge *everything*, and I was all too aware accidents could happen. Not only that, but I had to account for ambushes and the fact that I wouldn’t be able to dodge attacks I couldn’t see coming. Though, with Selene scouting for me...

After some more consideration, I made my decision, turning to Selene.

“What do you think about 15 points in Dexterity and 15 in Agility?”

[Intriguing,] her head tilted. [I would be interested to hear your reasoning.]

“Well... Strength is useless to me, and without magic, Spirit and Willpower aren’t very helpful. Dexterity and Agility are the two most obvious choices, and I don’t think Vitality would help that much. I have you scouting for me, so I’m unlikely to suffer an ambush. Even if I did want to spare some points, I don’t think the few I would be willing to put in Vitality would make much of a difference considering I’m only getting partial bonuses without my Astral Shift activated. By that same reasoning, the more points I put into just Dexterity and Agility, the more benefit I’ll get, even if it is only a small amount.”

[I see,] Selene swished her tails sharply. [While I don’t disagree, I also want to warn you about “min-maxing,” the method of putting all your points in only a few stats to receive substantial gains. Ignoring some of your stats can cause you to grow imbalanced and helpless against certain enemy types or encounters. While some Guardians have made this approach work, they are few and far between. Generally, a more balanced Magical Girl has more tools, giving them a higher chance of surviving any given situation. That being said, I do believe it makes the most sense to spend your points this way for now, though I will heavily advocate for a more balanced approach in the future.]

I found myself agreeing with Selene’s warning, and made a mental note to spend some of my future levels to balance out my other stats. Maybe I’d even develop a “build,” a plan for how many points to spend on each stat as I leveled. For now though, this would work.

[The only other thing I wish to add is that I currently require 180 mana at a minimum to manifest. Each level you gain will increase this amount by 10. You are currently at full mana, allowing me to indefinitely extend the duration I remain manifested. While no Anathema should be able to detect me, if I were damaged and dispelled, manifesting me once again would take a significant portion of your total mana.]

“Wait...” I looked at Selene in concern. “What exactly happens if you *do* get hurt?”

[Nothing serious. The body the Anathema would be hurting is only a magical construct, and if it takes enough damage, it will dispel in a burst of mana. If this happens, my consciousness will simply snap back to your Soul Gem and I would be none the worse for wear. I could even immediately be manifested once again with no repercussions. Rest assured that I do not even feel pain, and the only way to “kill” a Familiar is to destroy the Soul Gem they reside in.]

“Which is located in my brain... so there’s no real point in worrying about that. Not when anything that could kill you would also kill me too.”

[Precisely. A somewhat morbid thought, but temper it with remembering that while I may have the appearance of a simple stuffed animal, I am actually quite unkillable.]

For some reason, that *did* reassure me, and I turned my attention back to my stats, spending my points.

STATS	
Strength: 10	Dexterity: 25
Vitality: 10	Agility: 25
Willpower: 30	Spirit: 1

I blinked as my status menu disappeared only for my Stats section to appear completely alone. I’d never thought about calling up the individual sections by their headers, but I was glad to see it was possible. There was no reason to bring up the entire menu for every situation.

[Excellent,] Selene’s tails began to swish eagerly. [Now onto what we should spend your reward points on. First, I would recommend a Restoration Salve to place on your ankle wound. It will be relatively cheap at 5 points, and will only take about ten minutes to fully heal the wound. As for the rest of your 132 points, there are many options, but I would advise you to unlock the Modern Terran Clothing (Common) Vault. With it, you will be able to get clothes that not only fit but are also enhanced to provide protection.]

“How much protection? Won’t they still just be clothes?”

[Yes, but no. While they will certainly appear little different than normal clothing found on Earth, you will have options of buying enhanced versions created using advanced materials and techniques beyond what humans are currently capable of. This will make any clothes you

purchase much more durable, and while they won't be able to stop powerful, direct attacks, they will prove useful against almost anything else.]

I chewed on my lip, going over it in my head. It didn't sound like a lot, but it *was* better than nothing. Still...

“How much would unlocking different ammunition types cost? More offensive options might be helpful.”

[Unfortunately, even the cheapest option would cost 100 points. While I think unlocking specialized ammunition is a fairly high priority, doing so now would leave you only 32 points to use on ammunition. In the event you were injured, you would have precious few points to purchase healing items.]

Yeah, that sounded like a bad idea. I'd already forgone any points in Vitality, and the last thing I wanted was to end up a few points short of buying an item needed to save my life. Besides, the more I thought about it, the more varying my ammunition types seemed like it could backfire. I was still getting used to even *holding* a gun let alone using one, and introducing more complicated factors to manage probably wasn't the wisest.

“Okay. What clothing would be best, then?”

[I suppose we can forgo style and appearance concerns considering we don't have to worry about people seeing you. Considering comfort and maximum skin coverage... an Enhanced Hooded Sweatshirt, Enhanced Jeans, and Enhanced Combat Boots seem best, costing a total of 25 points. Combined with unlocking the Vault and purchasing the Regenerative Salve, you will have 57 points left to spend on ammunition and keep in reserve for healing items.]

“That sounds good,” I replied. “Let's go for five more magazines of ammo, then.”

[Alternatively, you can purchase a box of 100 loose rounds for 5 points to refill your empty magazines. With your five empty magazines and a sixth only containing 14 bullets, you would have 26 rounds leftover after filling them. 25 rounds if you chamber one and then add another to refill the magazine afterwards, giving you a total of nine full magazines.]

Blinking, I dipped my head in acknowledgement. I'd forgotten about Selene telling me it was cheaper to refill magazines, and 100 bullets was almost two entire “free” points of ammunition.

“Alright. Then let's go with all of that.”

[Purchased: Regenerative Salve]

[-5 Points]

[Modern Terran Clothing (Common) Unlocked!]

[-50 Points]

[Purchased: Enhanced Hooded Sweatshirt]

[-10 Points]

[Purchased: Enhanced Jeans]

[-10 Points]

[Purchased: Enhanced Combat Boots]

[-5 Points]

[Purchased: 100 9mm Silverbane Rounds]

[-5 Points]

[Remaining Points: 52]

One violet heptagram and flash of purple light later, I was left with three briefcases of varying sizes. Of course, they were all black save for the emblem, the silver crescent moon and rabbit-head outline Selene had been putting on everything else.

[Once you have applied the salve and put on the clothes, I would recommend bringing Sergeant O'Malley and Officer Oh in to help load your empty magazines. They can show you how to properly do so and might even have some tips. We can also discuss how best to hide your leaving and returning to the shelter while you work.]

I nodded, walking over to the biggest suitcase. Setting my gun on the table, I flipped the two latches on the case and opened it. Inside were two indents holding a pair of folded up jeans and a sweatshirt, both in dark black. Picking up the sweatshirt and unfolding it, I stopped mid motion. It had the familiar emblem stitched on the back, but what caught my eyes, however, was the... hood.

“Selene... what’s with the hood?” I asked carefully, my cheeks heating up.

[Oh?] she feigned innocence. [A hood can serve as head protection while also being easy to remove if it obstructs your vision. It seemed an obvious choice to me.]

“Not that!” I hissed, growing increasingly flustered as I turned to look at her. Lifting up the offending portions of the hood, I jabbed a finger at them accusingly.

“Why are there two floppy bunny ears on it!?”