

Chapter 11 - Success & SPG-01

The following days and nights went by in a flash, as I focused my efforts on single-minded grinding.

The nights were spent with a copious amount of [Meditation] grinding, while my days were spent continuing my [Juggling] journey—at least for the first day or two.

I ended up hitting a bit of a wall just as my Reflex and [Juggling] hit level three. While I now had a Perk point to spend, I hadn't quite decided yet which one from the [Juggling] tree I wanted.

Back to the wall, however: My current exercises were not giving me a good return on my investment any longer. Even when I added a seventh sock-ball to the lineup, despite the notable increase in difficulty, my experience rate went down to barely 100xp an hour.

Which, considering that Level 3 to Level 4 required a whopping 3000xp, was simply *not* enough to get me anywhere at a decent pace.

I had briefly considered starting to juggle my new combat knife with a couple of kitchen knives, but quickly threw that idea out, as the knowledge imparted by my [Juggling] Skill told me immediately all I needed to know: I had more of a chance to seriously injure or kill myself, than successfully complete sets.

So, by mid-afternoon of the second day of my self-imposed Skill-grinding experiment, I found myself hitting a ceiling with both my [Juggling] Skill and Reflex Attribute. The stagnation was frustrating, but fortuitously, I had other Skills that desperately required my attention—primarily my [Knives] and [Throwing] Skills.

The original plan had been straightforward: Just hurl my combat knife through the air to simultaneously level up both Skills.

But then reality reared its head.

Our cramped apartment didn't exactly come with a built-in knife-throwing range. Tossing a combat knife at the apartment's rockcrete walls presented far more risk than reward—it was more likely to either damage the blade or create unsightly holes in the wall than to provide any meaningful experience for either of my Skills.

At that moment, I couldn't help but mentally curse the genre-specific trope of cyberpunk worlds that relegated everyone, except for the power elite, to financial hardship.

The reason? I had launched a meticulous search throughout the *entire* apartment—except, of course, for Valeria's off-limits office—in hopes of finding a suitable makeshift target. Maybe a sturdy plank of wood or a dense foam board, anything really.

But the search yielded absolutely zilch, nada, nothing.

Our home was bereft of any such hidden resources; it was exactly as it appeared at face value—no buried treasures, no neglected "Oh, I forgot we had that stored somewhere" items. It was just the worn-out couch, the aged TV set, a basic kitchen furnished with four nondescript chairs and a dining table, an outdated radio, and the inexplicable surplus of Sera's socks that seemed to multiply by the day—like goblins in every fantasy story ever conceived.

Such were the limited elements that made up my world at the time, a world made even smaller by the constraints imposed by my wheelchair-bound existence—that particular aspect would end soon, however, if I had anything to say about it.

Faced with this conundrum, I decided to change my approach, opting to train each Skill—[Knives] and [Throwing]—in isolation.

For the [Throwing] Skill, the solution was rather straightforward. I already possessed the ideal ammunition after all, a fact Gabriel would begrudgingly attest to—my seemingly ever-increasing arsenal of sock-balls.

An added advantage of using sock-balls as opposed to something more substantial was that they posed no risk of property damage. This quickly led me to a little epiphany, after just a few sets of throwing my sock-balls against the wall: Merely throwing objects willy-nilly didn't yield the same gains as aiming at a designated target.

So, I improvised, fashioning a makeshift bullseye by taping my pillow to the living room wall. It wasn't the epitome of sophistication, but it served the purpose.

The real snag in this grind-a-thon was the constant interruption to retrieve my thrown sock-balls, however. The process became exceedingly tedious after the first dozen or so rounds. I had pondered various solutions, like tethering the socks with some kind of string to easily reel them back, but alas, we were devoid of any such resources like rope or sturdy thread in the apartment.

I tackled this snag head-on after the second day of my Skill-grinding quest.

Seeing that Gabriel was seemingly mostly recovered from his emotional outburst the days before, I asked him to pick up some thin but strong rope or string on his way back from work.

True to form, he returned with a spool of synth-thread that very evening—bless this man.

Tying this thread around my sock-ball projectiles transformed the entire experience. Being able to retract the sock-balls with a simple tug on the synth-thread was a game-changer, not just improving the pacing but also enhancing the overall enjoyment of my otherwise monotonous grind.

Sandwiched between those mind-numbing [Throwing] drills, I managed to squeeze in practice sessions to hone my [Knives] Skill.

This endeavour was comparatively straightforward.

All it required was essentially shadow-boxing while wielding my combat knife.

Even at Level 1, the Skill had bestowed upon me basic routines to follow, along with the proper muscle memory needed to execute them competently. It felt like a bona-fide cheat code for real-life, but who was I to gripe about that?

However, the Skill wasn't without its challenges.

Knifework isn't just about the blade; it's about the synergy of your body's momentum with every stab and slash.

And that's where, ultimately, my grind hit a myriad of stumbling blocks.

Due to my limited upper-body strength—thanks to my abysmal Body Attribute—my movements couldn't fully align with what the Skill's knowledge was instructing me to do. I was effectively handicapped, slowing down my progress and making the whole endeavour more cumbersome than it should have been.

I often caught myself mentally shouting, "Hey, [Knives], cut me some slack! I can't stand yet, okay?!" But despite these hiccups, I pressed on, reminding myself this was but a temporary setback.

In a way, I had to tip my hat to my past lifestyle for conditioning me to embrace the monotonous grind rather than dread it. While most people might have found what I was doing insufferably tedious, I was perfectly at home with it.

Trust me, laboriously grinding a couple of days on [Throwing] and [Knives] was child's play compared to, say, the eternal quest for a Rune Crossbow by bare-handing Lucky Implings.

As the third day of my experimental grinding marathon wound down, I felt that Gabriel was back to his usual self—his emotional turbulence seeming to have abated.

We were sprawled on the couch, absorbed in some of the more bizarre cyberpunk TV shows the networks had to offer.

We were also engaged in idle chatter, which, let me tell you, felt like the epitome of comfort. It reminded me how gratifying it was to simply unwind with someone close by—something I haven't had in my old life in a long, long time.

Seizing a pause in our conversation, I took the plunge. "Hey Gabe, do you have any idea how much a basic programming guide software costs? Or even better, how about a Crown—the most rudimentary one you can find?"

His eyes darted to me, widening in astonishment. "Whoa, hold on. Where's this coming from? Planning on becoming a runner, sis?"

I'd anticipated a response along these lines, so I had my answer ready.

"I've been so incredibly bored lately, that between my exercise recoveries, I found myself watching some TV shows on netridders. And, well..." Here, I lowered my eyes, feigning a blush of embarrassment, "they seemed kinda cool?"

Vulnerability, real or pretended, makes for a compelling story, right?

An electric silence buzzed between us, only to be shattered by Gabriel's hearty laughter, resonating against the spartan, rockcrete walls of our apartment. "Oh man, that's hilarious, sis," he chortled, as I mustered my most wounded '*How could you laugh at my exposed soul like this?*' expression.

It took him a minute to regain his composure. "Look, I'll gladly get you what you need to fend off the boredom, but you've got to understand that I can't just splurge my hard-earned creds on every whim of yours, okay?"

"Absolutely, Gabe! I'll even pay you back, I promise," I assured him with the zeal of an overly keen younger sister.

He let out an extended sigh before shifting into a more sombre tone. "Here's the thing: You've never shown the slightest interest in this before. Quite the opposite, actually. Remember that tutor Mom hired for you to learn programming basics? You bailed after one session, declaring, and I quote: 'Programming is for absolute losers.'"

"This stuff isn't exactly a bargain, Sera. If you're making a genuine commitment to actually use it, then I'll consider spending a good chunk of my savings on getting you one. But I need that assurance from you, got it?"

Inwardly, I cursed the original Sera for her stubbornness and narrow-minded opinions.

Who, in their right mind, would snub a chance at a [Programming] tutor in a cyberpunk world?! What the hell, old-Sera?!

That prior refusal to even entertain the notion of programming now made my current endeavour all the more difficult to sell to Gabriel. It was truly fascinating how my past self could serve as a roadblock for the person I was trying to become now. Shaking off my annoyance, I decided to go for the gold.

"Alright, listen," I began, my eyes locking onto his with gravity. "I swear on every star in the night sky and every microchip in this apartment, that if you invest in this for me, I will become nothing short of a programming savant or a runner extraordinaire. I vow to—"

He held up his hand, stopping my increasingly solemn and overwrought pledge. "Woah, slow down there, sis. You're turning this into a life oath. Let's not get too ahead of ourselves. I'll see what I can do, but keep in mind I probably can't afford both a programming guide and a Crown. So, which one would you prefer, between the two?"

I paused, mulling it over.

[Quick-Hacks] would give me a way to earn some quick cash once I was mobile, but the utility would be limited without substantial investment in good Verbs, Adjectives, and Nouns.

[Programming], on the other hand, would lay the groundwork for writing my own Quick-Hack subroutines once I became proficient, but be unlikely to provide any sort of short-term gains.

If I had to choose one, the latter option was the practical starting point, no question about it.

"I'll go for the programming guide," I declared confidently.

Gabriel's eyes widened, registering visible surprise, before a tender shake of his head followed. "You really are so very different... I had expected you to go for the Crown, at which point I would have fought you on it, 'cause that's the 'cooler' option. But you're really serious about this, huh...? I'll go look for one tomorrow, Sis. Leave it to me."

His words sent a subtle, but real, pang of emotional discomfort through me.

I was, ultimately, deceiving him after all. At least to a degree.

It was a deception born not of malice but of necessity. How could I possibly explain what had happened to the sister he once knew? I didn't even fully know myself!

I wished more than anything that this subterfuge wasn't necessary, but the reality was complex, and some truths were better left unsaid—for now, at least...

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The following day, as Gabriel sauntered back into our barely furnished apartment, he triumphantly presented a programming guide encased in a sleek carbon-fibre box. The air around it practically hummed with cutting-edge allure.

'Ah, praise the almighty circuit boards in the sky!' I mused internally. My gratitude for Sera's—no, my—big brother swelled like an overloaded server. 'May some benevolent cyber-deity rain down an avalanche of good karma on this man.'

When I took the guide from him, the weight of the carbon-fibre case struck me as a metaphorical stand-in for its actual cost. It felt heavy, brimming with untapped potential and a palpable financial burden. My throat tightened, as if I'd swallowed a lump of code. "Hey Gabe, how much did this set you back? And don't think of fudging the numbers; I'll know!"

His eyes locked onto mine. But armed with my upgraded Ego Attribute, I stood my ground easily. Eventually, he conceded with a sigh, "It was 570 creds, Sis. Burned through about 90% of my reserves, so you better make this worthwhile, you hear me?"

My eyes dilated in sheer disbelief.

For folks scrabbling towards the bottom of the financial food chain like us, 570 credits was no chump change; it was a downright exorbitant sum.

My thoughts ricocheted like frenetic data packets, hopping from how he managed to afford such a thing, to where he'd procured it and whether he had gotten scammed, to finally settling on the ghastly realisation that he likely liquidated nearly all his life's savings for this.

The magnitude of his sacrifice was almost beyond my understanding.

It struck me as something not just commendable, but transcendent—a love quantified in credits and yet priceless. And the object of such devotion was *me*, a baffling reality that pushed my emotional circuits close to overheating.

"I promise, Gabe," I choked out, my eyes stinging with grateful tears that I fought to keep at bay. My upgraded Ego came in clutch, helping me maintain a veneer of composure that the old me from just a couple days ago would have utterly failed at. "You won't regret this. Thank you, truly. From every fibre of my being—thank you. I'll repay you for everything you've done for me so far!"

The words were simple but laden with an emotional payload that nearly maxed out my emotional capacity—I had never really been someone that dealt well with emotions, at least when it came to my own or those directed at me.

All the while, a mix of gratitude and guilt thrummed in the background processes of my mind, but for that moment, all I could focus on was the profound thanks I felt.

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Ultimately however, my experiment came to a close at the end of the same day.

Needless to say, it was a resounding success—I did, in fact, not need any sleep with this body of mine. I had known that to be the case by the second day already, but had wanted to make sure it was definitely the case, so I had continued for the full 4-day duration I had arbitrarily set at the start.

My body and mind still got exhausted, of course, from exercising or even meditating for long stretches at a time, but I never felt the urge to actually sleep. I never felt tired, as if the perpetual, severe insomnia of my past life had followed me here, albeit without any of the negatives associated with it.

It was a strange feeling, to say the least, to simply not need sleep *at all*, but I couldn't deny that it was invaluable.

Conjuring up the G.E.M.A Profile window in my cerebral interface only further deepened that thought, as it invariably brought a smile to my face.

[<-- Attributes -->]

Body 0: 600 / 700xp

Reflex 3: 2100 / 3000xp

Intellect 1: 0 / 1000xp

Intuition 3: 700 / 3000xp

Edge 1: 0 / 1000xp

Tech 1: 0 / 1000xp

Ego 3: 1100 / 3000xp

[<-- Traits -->]

Blademaster

Polyglot

[<-- Skills -->]

[Meditation] 3 - 3000 / 3000xp — 1 Unspent Perk Point Available.

[First-Aid] 0 - 100 / 700xp

[Juggling] 3 - 400 / 3000xp — 1 Unspent Perk Point Available.

[Blades] 1 - 0 / 1000xp

[Throwing] 2 - 1700 / 2000xp

[Knives] 2 - 1200 / 2000xp

[<-- Perks -->]

None

[<-- Abilities -->]

Blademaster's Throw

Blademaster's Strike

During the gruelling nightly sessions, I had managed to max out my [Meditation] skill, a feat that left me buzzing with a sense of fulfilment.

Two shiny new Perks beckoned for selection, my Attributes had triple-levelled, and my other Skills had sprinted ahead from their previous lethargic pace.

'Sera, you absolute genius, look at all those sweet, sweet gains!' I mentally patted myself on the back, unable to contain my euphoria.

The temptation to abort the monotonous grind had reared its head more times than I cared to admit. Yet each time, I clenched my teeth and plowed through the resistance, spurred on by a near-obsessive determination.

And now, I was basking in the, very deserved, rich dividends of that perseverance!

While I had peeked at the [Meditation] Perk tree almost instantaneously upon hitting Level 1, a final decision on which Perk to lock in still eluded me—much like my [Juggling] Perk.

The issue wasn't a lack of good options; it was an excess thereof.

'Damn you, choice paralysis! If only I could have them all,' I mused, lost in the plethora of tantalising possibilities.

That night, though, my attention was monopolised by a new Skill, one that beckoned with the allure of untapped potential: [Programming].

I resolved to unlock and drill into this Skill before making any calls on my existing Perks options. To me, it felt like [Programming] was going to be a cornerstone Skill, one I couldn't afford to simply treat as an afterthought. In a cyberpunk world, programmers were key.

Cracking open the carbon-fibre case Gabriel had bestowed upon me felt akin to a child tiptoeing down the stairs on Christmas Eve—each movement was infused with electric anticipation.

Nestled in a custom-cut foam interior lay a data-shard, its crystalline structure fragile to the eye but far more resilient in the reality of Neon Dragons. Trust me, those little shards could weather more than a couple of tumbles without flinching.

With my heart pounding in techno-beats of excitement, I carefully extracted the data-shard. It was time to dive into the labyrinthine world of [Programming], and I couldn't have been more excited.

The data-shard emitted a soft, red glow, its edges festooned with LED lights that seemed theatrically unnecessary but absolutely on brand for anything in the cyberpunk genre. To me, it looked like a talisman imbued with esoteric code-magic.

Even though I knew these shards were designed to be able to take at least a bit of a beating, I couldn't bring myself to handle it with anything less than the utmost reverence.

The sheer financial sacrifice Gabriel had made for this tiny, glowing object weighed heavily on my mind, nixing any cavalier attitude I might have adopted.

'More training in Ego needed,' I reminded myself at the realisation of my mental weakness, marking it down mentally for future sessions.

Imprinted on the shard's surface were characters reading: [SPG-01 00409].

My wiki-diving sessions had taught me the nomenclature—S for Simple, A for Advanced, M for Master, followed by "PG" for Programming Guide, then a serial number indicating its order of manufacture. This was the 409th Simple Programming Guide to roll off the virtual assembly line.

Not particularly groundbreaking intel, but seeing it here, something I'd only read about in the detached context of online wikis, sent a shiver snaking down my spine. *'This is going to take some getting used to,'* I pondered, momentarily entranced by the surreal familiarity of it all.

Shaking off the strange sense of déjà vu, I finally plugged the shard into my neck port.

The sensation of inserting data directly into one's nervous system was nothing short of paradoxical. It felt jarringly alien and strange, like a violation of everything that made you human—yet at the same time, felt utterly natural and expected.

The moment the data-shard slid into its designated port, a pulsating thrill radiated from the point of contact, traversing neural pathways as it suffused my entire consciousness.

Suddenly, it was as if I had been plunged into another dimension—cyberspace materialised before my mental eye. The space didn't just look digital; it felt it too, like a secondary, parallel reality woven from luminous threads of raw code and liquid data.

Within this simulacrum, there were various sections, each with its own distinct design.

One quadrant seemed filled with organised, linear shelves, each one a repository of knowledge that I guessed would be part of the guide itself—syntax, functions, algorithms, and the like.

Another section looked like a swirling, chaotic galaxy where random programs floated in abstract space—pre-written subroutines and examples to dissect and study, perhaps.

But the centrepiece of this faux reality, a structure that seemed to glow with a celestial light, was undoubtedly the development environment.

I'd been craving to access this Integrated Development Environment (IDE) since Gabriel had agreed to get me the data-shard, and for good reason.

Beyond its function as an educational platform, the IDE was a playground for coders.

It was a tool of liberation.

It meant that I didn't need to tether myself to a physical laptop or worry about affording some external software to run some simple test scripts. I could code here, within the confines of my mind, in real-time.

True, it wouldn't be as polished or detailed as code crafted through traditional means, but it was a stepping stone, a place to experiment and fail without consequence—and one that didn't cost me a literal arm and a leg to acquire.

The IDE in the SPG-01 shard was no rudimentary setup.

It was designed to mimic an architect's holographic drafting table, with floating windows displaying functions, classes, and variables. A sidebar buzzed with stacks of virtual textbooks for instant reference, while another screen looked like it was ready to display run-time errors and log files.

I noticed a virtual keyboard below, pulsing softly, awaiting my mental body's input to commence coding.

As awe-inspiring as this all was, it also unleashed a pang of guilt deep within me.

Gabriel had essentially exhausted his savings for this, believing he was investing in his sister's future. He didn't know, *couldn't* know, that the person standing here, immersed in this neon dreamscape of endless digital possibilities, was not the sister he grew up with.

The dissonance stung, but I shelved those emotions for later scrutiny.

Right now, there was code to write, and a whole new world to fathom.

And fathom it I would.

After all, Gabriel had gambled on me, and that was a bet I *refused* to let him lose...