

Chapter 37 - Mr. Stirling's Task

Without any delay, Mr. Stirling delved straight into explaining the nature of the task he had in mind for me. His tone was matter-of-fact as he outlined his role. "I function as a sort of, let's say... *external contractor* for Ether Labs. My responsibilities include ensuring smooth operations and managing damage control when things don't go as smoothly. A key aspect of my job is to safeguard our company's secrets and patents from our competitors. It's in this capacity that I will need your help."

As he spoke, I noticed a transmission request pop up from him.

Consistent with what I had observed with Valeria, Mr. Stirling's eyes revealed no hint of a colour change, a subtlety I had come to associate with interactions involving their advanced cybernetics and implants.

'Is this a unique feature of Ether Labs technology, or just a trait of high-end implants?' I pondered, still curious about the specifics of such tech, as I accepted the data transfer.

Immediately, my cerebral interface was inundated with information—detailed maps, notes, and documents seamlessly organising themselves into designated folders for later review.

The efficiency and thoroughness of the data dump were impressive, providing me with a comprehensive overview of the task at hand and indicating the level of professionalism and seriousness with which Mr. Stirling approached his work.

"These maps are your guide for where I need you and what to be on the lookout for," Mr. Stirling began, pointing to the detailed information that had just been transferred to my interface. "Your task is straightforward: I need you to retrieve data from my contacts within our competitors' circles. There are four drop-off points in total that you'll be responsible for. I've chosen this task as it's the least dangerous option available, but heed my previous cautions: 'Least dangerous' does *not* equate to 'safe.'

He paused for a moment, his expression turning a tad more serious. "While that irritating woman would undoubtedly be a thorn in my side if anything were to happen to you, understand that your safety is ultimately in your own hands. If something goes wrong, it's not on me. Sure, I'd feel remorseful, but remember, it was *her* decision to not assist me directly that puts you in this position," he added with a slight edge to his voice.

His words served as a stark reminder of the reality of the situation I was in.

The task, while seemingly simple, carried inherent risks. It was clear that while he might express regret to put me up to this task, he saw this mission as a necessary means to an end, and the responsibility for my well-being lay primarily with me and my own capabilities.

Mr. Stirling nodded as he continued to brief me on the details of the task. "I'll allocate only one drop-off point per day to manage the workload. It's important that you take your time and approach this methodically. Avoid taking unnecessary risks," he advised with a tone of seriousness.

"Your first objective is located on the 62nd floor, which is entirely under the control of Falkum Industries, one of our key competitors. In order to do that, you will need *this*," he paused, reaching into the sleeveless vest he wore loosely, and retrieved a small data-shard.

He held it up for emphasis. "This is an access shard. It's essential for entry, as the restricted elevators won't allow you access to that floor without it. Ensure it's properly slotted before you try, otherwise you will be locked out. This shard is only valid for a single day, which is tomorrow. It's *crucial* that you complete the data retrieval by the end of the day. Getting these shards isn't easy; they're quite rare and hard to come by, so there's no room for errors. Do you have any questions, or is everything clear to you?"

His instructions were clear and his expectations straightforward, unlike a certain mother's.

The urgency and importance of the task were similarly evident in his demeanour, as were the potential risks that I was taking on. There was nothing immediately apparent that required double-checking, but I decided to take a second to properly think it through.

'Reach the restricted floor, make contact or retrieve the data—seems straightforward enough. With my new gear and knife for defence, I have some level of protection. Sure, I'm not cut out for intense combat, especially against well-trained corporate agents, but with [Blademaster's Throw] and the surprise factor, I might just manage to extricate myself from a dicey situation involving a single adversary... Is there anything else I need to consider here?' I pondered, ensuring I hadn't overlooked any crucial details.

Yet, after much thought, only a couple of pressing questions came to mind.

"So, once I've secured the data, what's the next step? Should I bring it directly back to you, or is there another procedure? Any particular drop-off points or similar?" I asked. It was essential to clarify the endgame of this operation, especially since carrying sensitive information could be risky.

Mr. Stirling's reaction was immediate and somewhat comical.

There was a loud slap as he facepalmed with his chrome-coated hands, a gesture that echoed his oversight. "Oh, of course! That part slipped my mind," he admitted with a chuckle. "I'm used to handling these operations solo, so a drop-off point never even crossed my mind. Just bring the data back here, honestly. This floor is under Ether Labs' control, so our competitors shouldn't be able to follow you without an access shard. They can't get in here easily."

He laughed lightly, adding a bit of levity to the conversation, "And hey, if they *do* manage to get past our security, well, that's a problem I'll have to deal with either way. *In fact*, it might even be preferable if they come straight to me." His casual confidence in handling such a scenario reassured me that, at the very least, the end part of this task was in capable hands.

With a growing sense of confidence, I prepared to ask my next question, aware that it might be a bit bold, but feeling reassured by Mr. Stirling's demeanour thus far. He hadn't given the impression of someone who would take offence easily.

My decision to proceed with it was also influenced by the likelihood of gaining some valuable [Negotiation] experience from this interaction as well.

“Given the significant risks involved in these tasks, which you've acknowledged, I was wondering if there might be any form of reward for my efforts? I completely understand that I'm undertaking this to offset a debt, but it seems to me that my assistance will also enable you to focus on other pressing matters. Wouldn't my involvement in these tasks bring some additional value that might be worth compensating me for?” I asked, trying to strike a balance between respectfulness and assertiveness.

My question was genuine, reflecting both my understanding of the risks and the potential value I was adding to his operations. It was an attempt to negotiate not just as someone repaying a debt, but also as an individual contributing significantly to his endeavours.

As I finished my query, a tense silence fell over the room.

Mr. Stirling's face was unreadable, causing a surge of anxiety within me.

Was my question too much? Did I overstep my boundaries? These thoughts raced through my mind, but my Ego Attribute seemed to bolster my resolve, helping me maintain a stoic and impassive demeanour despite the rising unease.

After what felt like an eternity but was only a few seconds, Mr. Stirling's expression shifted.

He let out a chuckle, shaking his head slightly as he muttered, "That damn irritating woman really is teaching them everything she knows, huh?" It was unclear whether he was amused or exasperated, perhaps a bit of both.

Finally, his gaze met mine, a hint of respect flickering in his eyes. “Alright, I'll give you this: You've got some fucking guts to ask this. So sure, I'll pay you for your efforts. It won't be the full rate, considering you're working off a debt, but I recognize the value you're bringing to the table. Don't let anyone say I am not generous to the people that help me out,” he conceded.

His response was a relief, not just for the prospect of some compensation but also for the acknowledgment of my contributions beyond mere debt repayment.

It was clear that Mr. Stirling, while stern, was fair in his dealings.

The fact that he was willing to offer some form of payment, despite the circumstances, spoke to a certain pragmatism and perhaps an underlying sense of fairness. It was a small victory, but one that made me feel more like an active participant in this arrangement rather than just a debtor fulfilling an obligation.

Expressing my gratitude, I responded with a modest nod of my head, "Thank you for your understanding and generosity, Mr. Stirling. I truly appreciate it." I knew the importance of humility, especially after making such a forthright request.

It was crucial to maintain a balance of assertiveness and respect in these interactions.

Mr. Stirling and I briefly exchanged a few more words about the specifics of the mission, finalising the details. Then, somewhat abruptly, he led me to his doorstep, indicating that our meeting had come to an end.

"You now have all the necessary information to successfully complete your first assignment. I expect to see you after its completion tomorrow. And remember," he added with a stern look, "stay vigilant and don't make any stupid mistakes."

His parting words carried a weight of expectation and a reminder of the seriousness of the task ahead. Stepping out from his doorstep, I felt a mix of determination and caution. Mr. Stirling's trust, albeit born from necessity, was something I didn't intend to take lightly.

As I strolled back towards my family's apartment, lost in thought, I couldn't help but reconsider my initial impressions of Mr. Stirling.

'He's proving to be quite the upstanding individual, much to my surprise. Given his indirect involvement with the NeuroCorpse incident, I wasn't sure what to expect... But hearing his perspective has definitely shed some light on the situation. It seems the real issue here is Valeria's strangely rigid stance on the debt and her unwillingness to help Mr. Stirling, not his actions in specific,' I reflected.

'Maintaining a good relationship with him might be a good idea. He strikes me as someone you would definitely want to be able to call upon, if things go south.'

As I continued my walk, I instinctively brought up the G.E.M.A. System's notifications to review my recent gains.

[System]: 100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

[System]: 100xp gained for Ego Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.

'Definitely no monumental gains, but every little step helps to move towards the right direction. And it looks like my [Negotiation] Skill is edging closer to Level 1, too. I'm curious to see what insights it will unlock. I've never been particularly good at negotiations, so I'm eager to see what kind of knowledge I'll get,' I thought.

With these reflections, my attention then shifted to the most pressing matter at hand – the conspicuous, blinking [Task] notification that awaited my attention.

[Task Accepted: **Mr. Stirling's Request**]

[Description: *Collect the data for Mr. Stirling across several days. 0/4 Data Collected.*]

[Reward: 200 Character Experience + 1 Perk Point]

[Task Accepted: **Mr. Stirling's Request (First Data Collection)**]

[Description: *Collect and deliver the data to Mr. Stirling from floor 62 of the Delta Mega Building. 0/1 Data Collected. Time Limit: 33:04:13.*]

[Reward: 100 Character Experience + 1 Skill Point]

The sight of two distinct tasks displayed on my interface caused my eyes to widen in surprise. *'Separate assignments for each data collection, with individual rewards for each?!*

This is insane! I thought, my excitement barely able to be contained at the realisation of the potential benefits this arrangement could offer.

The prospect of receiving such substantial rewards for each task set my mind racing with possibilities. *'Could it be that the system will grant me a Skill Point for each data collection? There's no way, right?! Or might the rewards vary with each new task...?'* I pondered, my thoughts tumbling over each other as I considered the implications of either scenario.

Previously, I had utilised the free Skill Point I had gotten from Mr. Shori's request to enhance one of my higher-level skills, maximising the experience gained. However, since that decision, I had spent considerable time reevaluating my approach to managing Skill Points in the future.

I had devised a new strategy, one that I believed would be more effective in the long run and was keen to put into practice. This unexpected development offered a perfect opportunity to test my revised approach to skill management.

I had decided to prioritise those Skills that were notoriously difficult to level up, first. Among these, one skill stood out as the most deserving of immediate attention, whenever I got access to any Skill Points at all: [Appraise].

[Appraise] was not just any skill, after all; it was my first and only Rare Skill at the moment.

Its importance in my skill set was undeniable, making it the obvious choice for the Skill Point I would earn upon completing this Task. Although I could only elevate it to Level 2 at maximum for the time being, due to my current Tech and Intellect Attribute levels, even unlocking the first level was a significant milestone. It would grant me the [Appraisal] Ability, assuming the system here followed the same rules as in the game.

The [Appraisal] Ability promised to be a transformative tool for my endeavours, particularly for future shopping and negotiating scenarios. It would enable me to assess items and equipment with a level of detail and accuracy that was previously vastly beyond my reach.

But now, with the promise of at least one Skill Point and the potential for up to four of them, I would be able to rapidly accelerate my progress towards it and other, similarly important Skills.

A quiet exclamation of joy escaped my lips, "Fuck yes! This is fucking amazing!" as I neared our apartment's door. Upon reaching the entrance, I effortlessly scanned my biometrics, allowing for smooth access into the safety of our home.

The thrill of anticipating the numerous rewards awaiting me over the next few days was exhilarating. It wasn't just excitement; it was a surge of pure *elation*. This feeling was so intense that it propelled me into immediate action.

I wasted no time in safely storing my newly acquired equipment and swiftly changing into my regular workout gear.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I stepped out of the apartment once more, my mind set on further [Athletics] training.

The idea of potentially advancing another level in my Skills was too good an opportunity to pass up, especially considering the troublesome Tasks that I would have to complete starting tomorrow.

'Every little bit of effort counts, and right now, capitalising on this momentum is key,' I thought to myself, already planning the training regimen that would best enhance my physical Skills and Attributes over the next few days.

I needed every little speck of help I could get, if I intended to not get into trouble during Mr. Stirling's tasks. Further levelling up my [Stealth] and [Athletics] Skills seemed like the first, best and biggest steps towards this goal...

—

Midway through my regular running routine, the reality of my over-enthusiasm hit me hard. I hadn't allowed myself any rest since my last workout, and now my muscles were protesting vehemently, urging me to halt my exertions.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch..." I grumbled under my breath, significantly slowing my pace as I made my way back to the apartment. My eagerness to capitalise on the momentum from the [Task] rewards had led me to push my physical limits too far, too fast.

The absence of my usual Rest using the Rest Function after my shift at Mr. Shori's was a stark reminder of the need for balance in training.

Without it, I was just as susceptible to muscle fatigue and overexertion as anyone else. The Rest Function usually enabled me to train relentlessly every day without concern for physical strain. But, having been busy with Mr. Shori's stall, immediately followed by the shopping trip, and without a recent Rest, I was feeling the full brunt of human physical limitations.

Upon returning home once again, I decided that a quick shower and some rest were in order. There were still a few hours to go before Gabriel or Oliver would be back, giving me ample time to work on some other important Skills. Gabriel, I recalled, was likely still working off the mandatory overtime he had accrued following his near-death experience a few days ago.

As such, I settled into my bed and I reached for the SPG-01 shard tucked beneath my pillow, intending to dive into the private cyberspace it offered in order to continue my [Programming] and [Netrunning] training. Now that I had a proper deck, I needed to get started on my [Quick-Hacks] earlier rather than later.

In the midst of preparing for a dive into the digital world, I had an important realisation: I had yet to inform Valeria about my assignment from Mr. Stirling, which had momentarily slipped my mind.

Promptly, I exchanged the Restricted Shard with the SPG-01, placing the red shard on my nightstand. I then quickly composed a detailed message to Valeria, outlining the specifics of Mr. Stirling's request.

'I can't believe I almost forgot to update her. Given her insistence on being informed about every aspect of Mr. Stirling's demands, overlooking this, could have had dire consequences,' I thought, a chill running down my spine at the potential repercussions.

After the events of yesterday, the last thing I wanted was to ruffle Valeria's feathers.

With the message sent and a weight lifted off my shoulders, I finally allowed myself to relax in bed. The soothing effects of the earlier hot shower, combined with the chance to rest my weary muscles, brought an involuntary sigh of relief.

The comfort was tangible, a much-needed respite after the day's myriad activities.

Now, with the SPG-01 shard in place, I was ready to delve back into its cyberspace. It was time to continue my training as an aspiring netrunner under the guidance of Kill Joy's digital-ego...

—

The remainder of my evening passed in a blur, fueled by intense focus and determination as I delved deep into my [Programming] and [Netrunning] studies.

With the deck now in my possession, it was imperative that I quickly advanced to the [Quick-Hacks] section of the guide. Without this knowledge, the deck would be underutilised—merely a sophisticated and very expensive dust gathering tool.

While I had a general understanding of quick-hacks and their functionality, the nitty-gritty of coding my own subroutines and effectively deploying them in netrunning scenarios eluded me still. At this stage, any attempt to use quick-hacks would necessitate sourcing subroutines externally—a challenging prospect given my limited finances and the lack of connections in the netrunning community.

This only added to my urgency to learn and master these Skills independently. There was no way I could get all the subroutines I wanted with any real urgency considering my current income and connections.

Later that night, Oliver and Gabriel returned home, both visibly drained and not in the mood for conversation. Gabriel, in particular, was visibly spent. He practically inhaled his dinner—one of my self-made ramen-style soups from Mr. Shori's place, which I continued to bring home almost every day—before crashing into his bed.

Watching Gabriel succumb to exhaustion, I felt a surge of empathy for him. *'He must be utterly dead... To work a gruelling 16-hour shift after the trauma he experienced recently, and still grappling with residual muscle and phantom pains from last night... I can't even imagine,'* I reflected somberly as I observed him slump into his cot.

Oliver, too, was visibly worn out.

The ongoing issues at his workplace seemed unrelenting, and with the official investigations into the death of the corporate netrunner underway, it was likely his late arrivals would become a routine occurrence as well.

With both my “roommates” in need of rest, I dedicated the remainder of my evening to further training with the SPG-01 shard. It was crucial to sharpen my Skills, particularly in light of the upcoming task Mr. Stirling had assigned to me.

As such, my day ended with some additional SPG-01 training, before I clocked in for the night myself. I needed the Rest Function to rejuvenate me for the following day.

There was no question of facing Mr. Stirling’s assignment without being at my absolute best.

Before initiating the Rest Function, I took a moment to review the progress I had made in the recent hours. It was a habit of mine to check my gains at the end of the day, a small ritual that helped me keep track of my development and growth.

[System]: 400xp (+200xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 300xp.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Stealth] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Edge Attribute.

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

[System]: 500xp gained for [Programming] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [Netrunning] Skill.

[System]: 400xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

As I reviewed my profile, a mix of determination and concern washed over me.

*'It's decent progress, but not quite where I need to be. The rate at which I'm gaining experience needs to be **faster**. The amount of bullshit happening around me seems to be accelerating, and I can't afford to lag behind like this. I initially planned to focus on steadily improving my Skills and Attributes, yet here I am, suddenly entangled in corporate espionage in a cyberpunk world. If this situation doesn't scream "trouble ahead," I don't know what does,'* I pondered with a growing sense of urgency.

Despite these challenges, however, there was still a silver lining. *'Tomorrow's morning routine should bump my Body up to a 4. That's a significant step forward, pushing me above the average in terms of physical prowess. Given the short timeframe and the circumstances I'm dealing with, this is probably the best immediate improvement I can hope for...'*

This thought provided a small comfort, a reminder that while the situation was intense and demanding, I was still making tangible progress—far faster than I had any right to, considering I had just awoken from a coma mere weeks ago.

With these reflections in the back of my mind, I punched in the customary 8 hours for the Rest Function and hit confirm...