

Chapter 162 - Cleaning

My eyes fluttered open almost the instant I mentally confirmed the Rest Function, just like it always did.

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

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

Not having to deal with the soul-crushing grogginess of natural sleep—like yesterday, when Valeria had been watching me breathe like I was a science experiment—was honestly one of the most criminally underrated perks of the Rest Function.

It always dumped me straight back into full awareness with no dragging limbs or sluggish thoughts attached.

‘Thank you, Rest Function,’ I thought quietly as I swung my legs over the bed and started getting ready.

Today was going to be another mentally exhausting one.

Interacting with Miss K and the rest of the dojo crew was guaranteed to be an Olympic-level bullshitting event, and I already felt tired just thinking about it.

But first things first: Morning workout. Shower. And then the usual stint at Mr. Shori’s...

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By the time I stepped out of the shower after my shift at Mr. Shori’s—because walking into the dojo smelling like algae noodles and ramen oil really wasn’t the vibe I was trying to cultivate with them—I was relieved to find that the visit had been blissfully uneventful.

Just a simple day at work with a kindly old man—and a delicious bowl of Ramen for lunch, just what the Ripper had ordered.

Except he didn’t.

The Ripper hadn’t even talked to me after being half up in my guts.

Rude, honestly. But not exactly unusual for the business.

Now, with a towel slung over my shoulders, I finally took a moment to check my gains from the last couple of days of social juggling and damage control.

[System]: *Notice: Experience rundown has been condensed further, for ease of interaction. This setting can be changed by the User via the usual channels.*

[System]: *The following Skills have gained experience: [Contortion], [Athletics], [Stealth], [Acrobatics], [Cooking], [Negotiation], [Appraise], [Accounting], [{Anima Razor}]*

[System]: *The following Attributes have gained experience: Body (+ Bonus XP), Reflex (+ Bonus XP), Intuition, Edge, Tech (+ Bonus XP), Ego, Anima (+ Bonus XP)*

My eyebrows shot up as I stared at the list, a vague sense of disappointment creeping in.

‘...*That’s it?*’ I thought flatly. ‘*Where are the numbers? Where’s the dopamine? Where’s the satisfying “number go brrr” part of all this?!*’

Sure, the lists had been getting long lately, but this felt downright *aggressively* minimalist.

I sighed and pulled up the System Settings, navigating straight to the notification preferences. It didn’t take long to find what I was looking for—a dropdown tucked neatly under Experience Rundowns.

Very Condensed

Condensed (Current)

Condensed + Highlights

Changes Only

Full Breakdown

I squinted at the options.

‘*This isn’t even the **Very** Condensed one?*’ I muttered internally. ‘*What does that show—“Something changed.” that’s it?*’

With a flick of mental input, I selected Condensed + Highlights after skimming the description. It promised to flag outliers and unusual gains instead of lumping everything into a polite blur, which sounded far more my speed.

I reopened the earlier System Notifications.

A few new lines slid neatly into place.

[System]: *The following Skills have gained experience: [Contortion], [Athletics], [Stealth], [Acrobatics], [Cooking], [Negotiation], [Appraise], [Accounting], [{Anima Razor}]*

[System]: *Skill gain Highlights:*

[System]: *400xp gained for [Negotiation] Skill.*

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

[System]: *300xp gained for [Accounting] Skill.*

[System]: *200xp gained for [{Anima Razor}] Skill.*

[System]: *The following Attributes have gained experience: Body (+ Bonus XP), Reflex (+ Bonus XP), Intuition, Edge, Tech (+ Bonus XP), Ego, Anima (+ Bonus XP)*

[System]: *Attribute gain Highlights:*

[System]: *200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Anima Attribute.*

[System]: *Remaining Bonus XP Available: 2700.*

“Oh yeah, that was way better,” I muttered as I started pulling on my gi for the trip to Arkion Dojo. “There really is something special about seeing numbers instead of vague text, isn’t there...”

I couldn’t deny it, though—cutting out the endlessly repetitive lists of tiny experience bumps for Skills that wouldn’t level for weeks, if not months, was probably healthier in the long run.

As much as I loved seeing numbers go brrr, those lists had started to feel more like visual noise than motivation.

‘This’ll probably also help with the creeping dread of figuring out how the hell I’m supposed to push Attributes like Reflex any higher...’ I thought grimly. *‘Rank 7 basically means I’m getting, what, one drop of experience a day if I’m lucky? And that’s with Bonus XP already factored in. Unless I start actively getting into fights, an hour of daily workouts just isn’t going to cut it anymore for any speedy progress.’*

Reflex Rank 7 had come with its own lovely System rundown on “effective training,” of course, and “effective” apparently meant several hours of borderline torturous drills.

I’d already folded *some* of those exercises into my new morning routine—thank you, System-granted knowledge and muscle memory—and yeah, the results were *technically* there.

They were just... painfully limited.

‘At this pace, I won’t see Reflex 8 for another two months. Maybe three.’

That sounded absurdly long until I stopped reacting on pure instinct and actually thought about it for more than half-a-second. Two to three months for what amounted to the equivalent of three years of high-level reflex training?

‘Yeah... okay. Fair. That’s still completely insane.’

I snorted softly to myself. *‘I’m really out here whining about a couple months of—let’s be honest—pretty casual effort. I’m absolutely being a spoiled brat here.’*

The System really was a cheat. And it was cheating entirely in *my* favor, at that.

Though, all that said, I really wasn’t all that eager to experience a Rank up to 8 anytime soon anyway, so the fact that the experience gains were starting to slow to a crawl was probably a blessing in disguise.

‘If I never reach Rank 8, that might honestly be fine with me too...’ I caught myself thinking—right before the numbers gremlin in my brain jumped me in a dark alley, beat that thought senseless, and dumped it in a ditch. *‘No. No! You **absolutely** want Rank 8. Without Rank 8 you can’t get Rank 9, and without Rank 9 you can’t get Rank 10. Get it together, Sera. Just because the last Rank up hurt so badly you briefly considered dying as a lifestyle choice doesn’t mean you get to abandon your numbers-going-brrr dreams. Focus, girl.’*

The pep talk did absolutely nothing to dull the memory of that sheer, unfiltered agony from the day before, though. Just thinking about it sent a cold shiver crawling up my spine and left my stomach doing uncomfortable little flips.

So I did what any perfectly reasonable, well-adjusted person would do in my situation: After shoving my Raz into my gi for any potential trouble coming my way, stepping out of the apartment, and listening to the familiar automatic lock beep behind me—nobody home, as usual—I crushed those thoughts down hard and distracted myself with other, equally stressful problems.

All while walking straight toward the place that was directly responsible for most of that stress existing in the first place.

‘So... How the hell do I deal with the dojo crew and Miss K today...?’

By the time I reached the Arkion Dojo, I still hadn’t gotten anywhere near a real plan beyond, *“Just try bullshitting your way through it. Surely it’ll work out, somehow,”* which—yeah—was not exactly a stellar showing on the strategy front.

‘Sometimes I really do wonder if I’m actually just stupid, or if I’m way, way over my head with all of this... Or both,’ I thought, and not for the first time.

At least I had arrived twenty minutes early like I’d intended, so I had that going for me, which was nice.

I stepped inside and headed toward the back, slowing a little as I entered the large training area and watched one of Miss K’s other groups sparring with her inside the blue-marked area.

Five students this time—one more than our usual crew—throwing themselves at her with the same desperate creativity I’d grown intimately familiar with: Feints, coordinated rushes, sudden surprise attacks, even the classic *“everyone move at once and hope chaos does the rest”* approach.

Someone *actually* bumped into another mid-move and nearly ate the floor.

I couldn’t help but smile.

We’d tried all of that too. Every single dumb idea like that.

And just like us, they weren’t even close to touching her.

They were drenched in sweat, breathing hard, movements getting sloppier by the second, while Miss K looked... completely and utterly fine.

It took her less than a minute to call the session after I had entered, glancing at the time and clearly deciding they were done for the day, before someone actually ended up hurting themselves from exhaustion.

It struck me as oddly surreal to realize—properly, this time—that she wasn’t just *our* instructor.

She had other students. Other groups.

Seeing it firsthand felt a bit like running into your teacher in a random supermarket and suddenly remembering that they did, in-fact, exist outside your own little life's bubble.

'It would've been pretty weird if she didn't have more Blue-group students than anything else. No idea why that never clicked before,' I thought, returning the slightly rushed bows from the other students as they filed past me and out of the dojo.

Miss K, meanwhile, was doing... *something*... inside the blue-coloured zone they'd just finished sparring in.

I couldn't see exactly *what*, but it didn't take a genius to tell it was Anima-related.

And honestly, with Miss K right there and very much available, I didn't feel nearly as anxious about the idea of activating Anima Sight and then potentially failing to shut it back down again. She'd mentioned last time that I *should* be able to turn it off properly—I just hadn't ever actually tried.

There'd never really been a good opportunity to experiment since then.

The risk of messing it up, pulling the Sprites off my vision, and getting stuck half-blind or worse had always outweighed whatever benefit Anima Sight might've given me in the moment.

'Still,' I thought, watching Miss K work, *'that's something I really need to ask her about. Why my Anima Sight is always on unless I actively block it with Sprites. There has to be a way to flip that around, right?'*

So, for the first time in what felt like forever—but also not nearly as unpracticed as it probably should've felt, considering I'd dumped a whole heap of Anima into yesterday's [Anima Razor] show-and-tell for Misha and Jade—I focused inward.

Not on my eyes themselves, but on the Sprites clinging to them.

I couldn't see them, obviously, but I *knew* they were there.

I could very-so-faintly feel them, like pressure just behind my vision, if I focused just right.

'Alright... please, uh... move aside for a bit, so I can see?' I thought, mentally awkward as hell and very aware of how ridiculous it felt to politely address the World's microscopic robots, or whatever the hell they were.

And something answered.

That *something* tugged in that strange, intangible reservoir inside me—the same one Ego leaned on, the same one [Wall Runner] drank from, the same quiet well everything System-adjacent seemed to touch in its own weird way.

The pull was gentle but unmistakable, like a hand taking mine and guiding it.

And then my vision bloomed.

Colour flooded in all at once—threads, gradients, faint currents drifting through the air like heat haze made visible. The dojo didn't change, not really, but suddenly I could see the thousands upon thousands of Sprites of all different colours—although mostly green here in the training area—and I had to fight the instinctive urge to suck in a sharp breath.

Miss K stood at the center of it all like the calm eye of a storm.

What I'd previously thought were idle, half-unconscious finger movements suddenly snapped into sharp focus. Each twitch, each subtle curl or flick of her fingers sent ripples through the vortex around her, the Sprites responding instantly—like she was conducting a massive, invisible orchestra.

The air around her positively *churned* with color.

Most of the Sprites in the dojo were green, sure, but the ones wrapped tight around Miss K were different—thick bands of orange dominating the swirl, threaded through with streaks of red and green that flared and dimmed in time with her motions.

I didn't think about the implications, move to get a closer look or anything.

I just... stared.

It was mesmerizing in a way that went beyond pretty colors or spectacle.

This was control. Absolute, precise control.

Every Sprite moved with an unseen purpose, sliding into place like they'd rehearsed this exact moment a thousand times before.

I watched her work without really understanding it, my brain completely short-circuited by the scale of it. The way the currents bent around her. The way the colors shifted in response to movements so small I would've dismissed them entirely without my Anima Sight pointing towards them being more important as a result of the Sprite's reactions to them.

I couldn't even *begin* to guess what she was doing—only that it was deliberate, clearly well practiced, and far beyond anything I'd ever touched in the realm of Anima so far.

And then, just like that, it was already over.

The vortex unraveled.

The orange Sprites peeled away first, the majority of them thinning out as they drifted into the wider room, fading as they merged with the ambient flow and some rare ones slipped cleanly out through walls and ceilings.

The red and green followed, until the space around Miss K looked almost normal again—if "normal" could even really apply to what the world looked like with Anima Sight active.

Next, she raised both hands slightly, palms open.

And the ground beneath her feet responded immediately.

A surge of green Sprites poured up from below like a living tide, flooding the cleared combat zone and settling into it. They spread evenly across the floor and air, thickening the space where hand-to-hand training actually happened into an almost soup-like consistency from the looks of it.

'The healing Sprites she was talking about last time...' I recognized.

When she finally let her hands drop, she exhaled a slow, shaky breath.

A bit of sweat had gathered along her brow, which she flicked away with the back of her wrist before turning toward me.

"Well?" she asked, a faint smirk tugging at her mouth. "Enjoy the show?"

I nodded, still half-stuck staring at the space where the vortex had been only a moment ago.

"Yeah," I admitted honestly. "I really did. I just... don't actually know what I watched."

Miss K tilted her head, studying me for a second, then nodded once.

"Good. Then tell me what you saw," she said, tone casual but clearly testing me. "And I'm glad you're getting more comfortable using your Anima Sight."

"Ahh... About that," I scratched the back of my neck, a bit sheepish. "That was actually the first time I've ever used it on purpose. I'm still not entirely sure I can make it stop again, so... I'll probably have questions about that later, if it's not too much to ask..."

She chuckled softly but gestured for me to continue.

I took a breath and replayed the image in my head. "You were standing in the middle of... everything. Like a storm of Sprites. Most of the room was green, but around you it was mostly orange, with some red and green mixed in. And your hands—your fingers were moving, barely at all, but it felt like they were... directing it. Like you were conducting them."

Miss K nodded along, expression unreadable but approving. "Good."

She tapped two fingers together. "Each colour governs a different domain. Green is life—healing, growth, recovery. Orange is matter. Structure. Physical reality. Red is just energy, really. Bit hard to describe without going metaphysical, so the freebie is that they weren't really that important to what I was doing. Knowing that..." She looked at me sidelong. "What do you *think* I was doing here, exactly?"

I could tell immediately that this was a test.

Not a harsh one, but a deliberate nudge to make me actually think instead of just gawking.

So I replayed the scene in my head—the timing, the colours, the way she'd done it right after the previous group left, before the next one arrived.

The spotless floor, the clean, non-sweaty smell in the air... Then it hit me.

There had been a distinct lack of cleaning supplies anywhere in the dojo, despite how much sweat, blood, and spit inevitably hit the mats during training.

“...Cleaning?” I ventured. “You did it right after the last group left. And I’ve never seen mops, cleaners, or anything like that around here. With orange handling matter, it would make sense that you were breaking things down, resetting the space. Sweat, blood, spit—everything that shouldn’t be there.”

For a split second, she just stared at me.

Then she smiled.

It was quick, sharp, and way too confident—and my stupid heart absolutely jumped at it.

‘Damn teenage hormones...!’

“That’s exactly it,” she said, nodding. “There’s a bit more nuance to it, but that’s all you need right now. The dojo stays clean because I tell the matter in it where it belongs—or whether it does at all.”

She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, exhaling slowly. “Not bad, Sera. For your first time seeing properly... you’re paying close attention. That’s good.”

I swallowed, feeling a weird mix of pride and dawning dread, like I’d just taken one more confident step into waters I absolutely could not see the bottom of yet.

“Now, try turning off your Anima Sight,” Miss K said, walking closer until we weren’t practically shouting across half the dojo anymore.

I did as told and reached for the Sprites I’d nudged aside earlier, or at least the idea of them.

‘Alright... please come back and hide all this again,’ I thought, vaguely picturing the blue Sprites settling over my eyes like a blanket being pulled up.

And... Nothing happened.

I frowned and tried again, pushing a little harder, which was strange in itself—trying to apply effort to something that didn’t really exist in any physical sense was deeply unintuitive.

‘Hide the Anima. Like before. Please,’ I thought, slower and more deliberate this time.

For a heartbeat, it still felt like nothing was happening, and I could feel that familiar spike of doubt creeping in. Then something tugged deep in my chest and the riot of colour bleeding through my vision began to fade.

Threads dulled, currents thinned, until the world snapped back into its normal, boring state.

“Ha!” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Miss K raised an eyebrow.

"I... I did it," I added awkwardly.

She nodded once, utterly unsurprised. "I told you so. You're a bit of a natural at this, clearly."

She continued with a smug smile, "You know, most new Practitioners actually struggle quite a lot with this. But I figured telling you that you'd have no problems with it would do just fine, given your intuitive understanding of all this stuff."

My jaw was half-slack at that admission, but that didn't last long.

Miss K crossed her arms and let her gaze sweep over me in a slow, assessing way that made me shift my weight without meaning to.

"Now," she said, tone sharpening just a touch, "you weren't here last time, and your sudden interest in all things Anima already gave me a hint. That, and the ominous message from your mother."

She met my eyes.

"But I still have to ask."

Here it came.

"Just what, exactly, happened to you, Sera? What's going on with your body...?"