

Chapter 154 - Rank 7

The first order of business was, naturally, changing my Bonus Experience allocation.

I pulled up the System Interface, flicked through the menus, and redirected everything into Body and Reflex—nothing else. It wasn't like I expected to get random experience gains while working out, but with how stingy the System could be sometimes, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Especially when there was a real deadline attached to that [General Attribute Point].

After that, it was all about putting in the work.

I started my usual routine, though "usual" was a bit of a stretch, given the lack of space. The apartment's living room wasn't exactly ideal for training—no hallways to sprint through, no way to practice vaults or proper rolls—so anything [Athletics] or [Acrobatics]-related was off the table.

What was left were the classics: Bodyweight drills, high-intensity bursts, and enough repetition to make my joints complain.

Body was easy enough to push—it responded well to steady effort—but Reflex required something a bit trickier. That meant fast-twitch drills: Reaction snaps, balance holds, muscle discharges that made my limbs burn.

I had to train my speed, my control, the precision of my movement, not just the *strength* behind it, like I did for Body.

Thankfully, the System always handed out a rough training outline whenever I ranked up an Attribute, so I wasn't completely winging it.

Without that, I'd have probably stalled out around Rank 3 or 4 ages ago.

Before all this, my "workout knowledge" had pretty much begun and ended with push-ups, sit-ups, and crunches—no variations, no structure, just whatever video recommendations had popped up in my feed once upon a time.

Now, though? The System had turned exercise into something measurable.

Numbers. Goals. Levels.

Which made it a lot easier to follow and get addicted too; after all, numbers going brrr was really fun.

I had two drops to earn per Attribute—four total—which was no small feat at Rank 5.

But given that I was effectively trapped inside the apartment for the day, I didn't have much else to do.

The first drop came easily enough after about twenty minutes. My muscles had warmed up, my arms burned pleasantly, and my breathing had evened into that steady rhythm that meant I was finally in the zone.

Body ticked up first, as expected.

Reflex, though, made me work for it, as always.

The repetitive movements weren't impressing the System quite as much for that one.

It took nearly an hour of high-intensity reaction drills—shadow feints, explosive lunges, quick pivots—to get that sweet, satisfying ding. By that point, sweat had soaked through my shirt, and the floor under me looked like I'd forgotten how to swallow my own spit halfway through.

I gave myself a short break to catch my breath, but it didn't last long.

There wasn't much else to do here, and I wanted those numbers to move.

So I kept at it—relentlessly, stubbornly—until my arms shook, my legs felt like lead, and my reflection in the bathroom mirror, whenever I took a short break to wash my face, looked just about ready to pass out.

After three and a half hours of sheer repetition, with only brief stops for water and air, the final chime rang out. Both Attributes had registered their second drops.

My entire body felt like it had been run through a cement mixer, but the sight of those neat little +300xp notifications made it all worth it.

[System]: 300xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 700xp.

[System]: Body Attribute has **reached** 6. **Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.**

[System]: 300xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Reflex Attribute. Available Bonus left: 600xp.

[System]: Reflex Attribute has **reached** 6. **Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.**

"Haaa...! Fuck yeah!" The sound that tore out of me was somewhere between a groan, a sigh of relief, and a victory yell—all tangled together into something halfway human.

I collapsed onto the carpeted living room floor, chest heaving, every breath scraping its way out of me as I just lay there, soaking in sweat and triumph alike.

'Training Attributes without any Skill to go alongside it is so much worse... god damn,' I thought, staring up at the ceiling, too tired to even move.

But that was fine—the hard part of the day was over.

All that was left was to trigger the upgrades and drop the [General Attribute Point] into Reflex, then I'd be set. Ready for whatever fresh chaos life decided to throw at me the moment I stepped out of this apartment again.

With that thought in mind, I pulled up the System Interface, swiped through to the Attribute menu, and confirmed the first upgrade—Reflex, Rank 6.

The moment I confirmed the upgrade, the familiar System chime echoed in my head.

I had thought I knew what was coming, but the very moment the upgrade actually started, I had immediately realized I had been dead-wrong.

My entire body detonated into unadulterated *pain*.

Every muscle in my body seized at once, locking me in place like I'd been hit with a voltage too high for human tolerance. My breath caught halfway through my throat as invisible hands abruptly dug deep under my skin, threading through tendons and fibers, pulling, twisting and tearing—reshaping me from the inside out.

'*God—shit—fuck—!*' The thoughts came in bursts, cut short by the next wave of agony.

It felt like something was literally peeling me apart, fiber by fiber.

My muscles burned as if someone had poured concentrated acid through my bloodstream, while others cramped so violently I thought they might snap outright.

Every nerve ending *screamed*.

My spine arched off the carpet involuntarily, my body shuddering as if it were trying to reject the change.

And underneath all that pain, there was movement. A faint *sensation* of structure.

My body's musculature was being rewritten, I could tell thanks to [Elemental Balance]—each microfibril of muscle was being stripped, reinforced, and rewoven.

My joints popped and shifted as if the System was calibrating them for new tolerances.

The fine-tuned pathways that carried motion—the milliseconds between thought and action—were getting re-coded, honed for precision that no human should've naturally developed in just a few weeks, like I had.

I could *feel* the magnitude of the changes being mercilessly forced into me.

Five and a half years' worth—*two entire years* on top of what was already there from Rank 5—of high-intensity training, coordination drills, and reflex conditioning compressed into mere seconds of physical changes.

My entire nervous system became a battlefield as the System started adjusting that, as well—neurons firing in unnatural patterns, my brain desperately trying to adapt to signals it had never handled before or even knew it needed to.

At some point, I noticed myself suffocating.

Not by choice—just because my body simply *forgot* how to breathe.

Every time I tried to inhale, my chest convulsed from another surge of pain, my diaphragm locking up as the System tore into the last remnants of my old limits and rewired them.

And then, just as suddenly as it started, it abruptly stopped.

The pain receded like a tide pulling back from scorched earth, leaving only the echo of its passage—raw tremors running through my limbs, every muscle twitching in uneven, jerky aftershocks.

My lungs finally caught up, now that the muscles around them were done being torn apart, and I sucked in air so sharply it made me dizzy.

The pain hadn't left cleanly—it lingered like smoke after a fire, clinging to every nerve, every tiny motion.

My limbs twitched on their own, spasming from the overload, and when I finally decided to try to sit up, my arms just gave out. I dropped back onto the carpet with a breathless grunt, my face hitting the carpet, stars bursting behind my eyes.

"Fff—fuck," I hissed between clenched teeth, rolling halfway onto my side.

Every movement sent dull, burning waves through the muscles that the System had just finished *remaking*.

It was like my entire body was still arguing with the idea of *existing* in this new configuration.

I tried again to get up, planting a shaky hand on the floor, pushing with my knees—and promptly collapsed again when my left thigh seized like it had turned into a steel cable.

The sound that left my throat was something between a growl and a whimper.

'*Okay. That's not happening,*' I thought, panting, sweat pooling at my temples and dripping onto the carpet.

The only way I was getting anywhere like this was by force.

So, with a mental flick, I engaged my Active Ego.

The effect was immediate—like someone had dumped all the hot, searing pain into a bucket of icewater. The pain dulled into a distant, almost nostalgic throb, and my breathing steadied as control flooded back into my limbs.

Moving felt utterly alien, however.

Every step was simply too sharp, too precise, like my muscles were following commands faster than I could issue them.

Still, thanks to my Ego taking the brunt of the mental damage, I managed to drag myself into the bathroom, leaning heavily on the sink as I tried to catch my reflection.

My face was a mess—slick with sweat, a bit of drool crusted on the corner of my mouth, eyes bloodshot from strain.

“Beautiful,” I muttered dryly.

The shower behind me was the only logical step.

I stripped and stepped in, letting the hot water pound against my skin.

It didn’t really *help*, but it *did* wash away the grime, the sweat, the physical reminders of what the System had just put me through. Watching it swirl down the drain made the whole thing feel *slightly* less unbearable.

When I stepped back out, though, it hit me all over again just how utterly *wrecked* I really was. Even with Ego suppressing the pain, every movement felt forced—like my body was a machine one calibration away from straight up snapping in half.

‘That’s fucking insane... I feel like actual death, and that was just Rank 6... Do I really want Rank 7 of this...?’

I barely made it to the bed before killing the Ego again, and the moment I did, reality crashed back down.

It was like being hit with a freight train made of muscle cramps. Every inch of me screamed at once, pain blooming in places I hadn’t even realized had muscles to begin with.

My arms twitched. My back spasmed.

I couldn’t tell if I wanted to scream or laugh or cry or maybe all three of them at once.

So I didn’t do any of it.

I just reached out mentally, dragging open the System Interface with trembling thoughts, and slammed the [Rest Function] confirmation as fast as I could.

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My eyes fluttered open an instant later, and I was greeted by a familiar sight.

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

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

Carefully, I flexed my fingers.

Each one moved with this unnerving speed and crispness, snapping into place like perfectly oiled servos—but without the faintest trace of pain. Encouraged, I rolled my wrists, then lifted my arms, stretching my shoulders before moving down to my toes, feet, and legs.

Everything responded instantly, and, even more importantly: No pain.

“Haaa... thank fuck,” I muttered under my breath, exhaling a long sigh of relief.

My whole body felt brand new—no soreness, no muscle pains, nothing left over from the torture the System had just put me through.

But there definitely *was* something different.

I felt light—far too light.

Like I'd just taken off weighted clothes straight out of a shonen anime.

Every motion came out faster than my brain expected, like the signal between thought and action had been trimmed down. Thirty percent faster, maybe more.

And it wasn't just *speed*, either. My precision was dialed in to an absurd level as well.

It didn't take long before I was just staring at my own hands, flexing my fingers in intricate, fluid motions I hadn't even thought to attempt before.

I could trace figure-eights in the air with a single fingertip like it was nothing; and I could even tell that I *was* tracing the same exact path every time, which seemed practically impossible.

"Holy fuck..." I whispered. "This is *no* joke."

Taking a second to breathe, I thought about what it really meant to now be Rank 6.

Rank 5 had already represented three and a half years of extensive training and conditioning.

Rank 6? That was another *two years* of pure refinement stacked on top.

Two years of nothing but advanced conditioning, muscle isolation, reaction drills, and nerve control. More than half the total effort it had taken to get to Rank 5, just *added on top*.

And those two years weren't beginner's work, like a good chunk of Rank 5 had been, as it had simply built on top of Ranks 1 through 4—the two years of pure-Rank 6 were elite-level, precision tuning of muscles, reflex arcs, and control, *exclusively*.

The fact that the System had just crammed all of that into me in a single, horrifying burst was... in one word, *impressive*, but also... extremely terrifying.

That realization made me pause.

'Should I really be using my [General Attribute Point] on Reflex right away...?'

There was a rhythm to how the body changed when training Attributes—a sort of biological groundwork that the System built on top of.

It wasn't like I went from zero muscle tone at Rank 3 to a sculpted six-pack the moment Rank 4 hit. The body evolved gradually as I gained experience—like normal biology would dictate. I was still human, after all.

The body adapted.

And then, when the System finally pushed it to the next stage, it was essentially just filling in the gaps, tightening the structure that was already there and remodelling the parts that needed changing to fit its vision.

Just like this upgrade—from 5 to 6—had come after *weeks* of actual training, real sweat and effort. And very real biological changes, that I had been able to observe in the mirror already—especially in regards to my arm musculature after learning how to throw proper punches from Miss K

The System had only really finished what I'd already laid all the groundwork for, during the Upgrade.

If I jumped straight from 6 to 7, though? There'd be *none* of that prep work.

No muscle conditioning, no nervous system adaptation, no biological changes to work off of, nothing for the System to *refine*—it'd have to create *everything* from scratch.

The thought alone made my skin crawl.

Just remembering the pain from earlier—the tearing, the burning, the way my lungs *forgot how to breathe*—made my chest tighten all over again. I'd only made it through it all so quickly because I'd forced myself with [Ego] and dumped it into the [Rest Function] before I broke down completely.

'Yeah... That shit hurt. Like a fucking lot...'

Still, I couldn't exactly *not* use the [General Attribute Point].

Leaving something that valuable just sitting there until the System forced the issue, or be applied to something less worthwhile, felt utterly wrong.

So, after a few minutes of mental back-and-forth, I settled on a compromise.

'Alright... Body first. If it kills me too much, I'll just hit the Rest Function right away and skip the screaming part, as a test run for the Rank 7 Upgrade.'

It wasn't exactly a well-thought-out plan, but it *was* a plan.

And I really wanted to know if I could game the System just a little.

I confirmed the Upgrade for Body Rank 6.

The change hit almost instantly.

My entire frame clenched like a single giant muscle, and the air punched out of my lungs in a choked gasp. Then came the tearing—deep, wrenching pulses rolling through me as the System went to work again.

But this time, it wasn't as sharp as Reflex had been.

Less slicing, more... grinding.

The pain was still *horrible*—no question there—but it wasn't the kind of total nervous system overload that Reflex had caused.

It was slower, more measured, in a way.

Like my muscles were being compacted, condensed into something denser and heavier, rather than rewired from the ground up. Each pulse felt like my body was trying to collapse inward before expanding again, just slightly harder, tougher and stronger than before.

Still, I wasn't immune to the pain.

I thrashed against the sheets, groaning through clenched teeth, jaw slackening when the pain peaked and drool started pooling under my cheek. The sound of my own ragged breathing filled the room, along with the dull thudding of my heart pounding in my ears.

'Not as bad,' I lied to myself through the haze. *'Just a... different kind of hell.'*

Body was very clearly about density, raw power and durability.

It didn't *need* to rewrite muscle fibers like Reflex did—it just needed to forge what was already there into something more compressed and solid.

But that didn't mean it was gentle by any stretch of the word. No, it was still plenty brutal.

Just... less... all-encompassing and overwhelming about it.

By the time the burning finally eased, I was shaking so hard my teeth clacked.

I lay there for a few seconds, eyes unfocused, chest heaving as I tried to remember how to breathe properly for the second time today.

"Not... gonna do the aftermath again," I muttered hoarsely.

Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I dragged open the System Interface with trembling thoughts and slammed the [Rest Function] confirmation once more.

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My eyes fluttered open a familiar instant later, and was greeted by the System welcoming me back, as always.

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

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

A quick check of my muscles—same routine as I'd done after the Reflex upgrade—told me everything I needed to know: No pain.

My body felt completely rebuilt, but in a slightly different way this time.

Where Reflex had left me feeling lighter, quicker, almost twitchy with newfound precision, Body felt... Denser.

Like every cell in me had been compressed into something tougher, more solid.

It wasn't a change in weight so much as presence—like I took up more *space* without actually being any bigger.

When I closed my fists, they felt like solid iron, compact and coiled with power. Even breathing felt sturdier somehow, my lungs expanding with this new, grounded strength that seemed to permeate my every fiber.

I took a few seconds to savor it, flexing my arms, tightening my core, rolling my shoulders—all with the kind of micro-control that [Elemental Balance] made possible.

The contrast between before and after was downright staggering.

My movements felt more deliberate and grounded now, more *real*, like I'd been walking around in a body made of cheap material before and only now gotten the real thing.

I allowed myself a brief moment to simply enjoy this newfound prowess, before forcing my thoughts back on the matters at hand.

'Alright... it's been, what, twenty-two hours since Valeria left? She's probably back by now.'

The idea of her barging in mid-upgrade sent an unpleasant chill down my spine.

But I couldn't just stop here.

The System didn't like being ignored; not one bit—it'd shove that [General Attribute Point] down my throat at the worst possible time if I didn't handle it *now*.

I already knew I'd need the Rest Function again afterward; there was no question about that.

Reflex had been pure hell, Body had been barely tolerable, and Rank 7 would no doubt be worse than both combined. And then my stomach growled right on cue, a harsh reminder that I hadn't eaten since—well, since before everything went to shit.

'Great timing, as always,' I muttered internally. *'Guess I better do it fast and hope Valeria just assumes I passed out from exhaustion again.'*

Taking a steadying breath, I brought up the System Interface one more time and confirmed the selection for the [General Attribute Point].

[System]: Use [General Attribute Point] on Reflex? *Y/N*

[System]: 6,000xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: Reflex Attribute has *reached 7. Upgrade delayed until User confirmation.*

Anxiety crawled up my throat, mixing with the sharp ache of hunger until I thought I might actually throw up.

Every nerve felt on edge, my pulse hammering somewhere between panic and pure dread.

Luckily, my passive Ego and Edge worked in overdrive, smoothing out the worst of it—enough for me to take a few shaky breaths and gather my bearings.

‘Alright... just one more upgrade. That’s all you need to suffer through, Sera. How bad could it really be?’ I lied to myself, whispering the mantra over and over as if repetition might make it true. Spoiler: It didn’t.

Finally, when I ran out of excuses to stall, I opened the System Interface and confirmed the upgrade.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the world tilted.

My vision blurred as my entire body seized up.

I bit down on the piece of clothing I’d shoved between my teeth—thank the gods for past-me’s foresight—right as my insides *exploded*.

There was no other way to describe it.

The pain wasn’t like anything physical—it was molecular, cellular, like the System had decided to rebuild me cell by cell this time around and had simply decided by annihilating my entire being as a gentle start.

Every muscle fiber in me *screamed*.

Tendons twisted, bones pulsed like they were melting, and my skin felt like it was being peeled away and replaced one inch at a time.

The only thing I could do was convulse and try to *survive*, somehow.

And then... nothing.

Just black.

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When I came back, I was already crying.

The pain hadn’t gone anywhere—it was just *there*, all-consuming and merciless. My body trembled on instinct, groans and half-formed whimpers escaping before I could stop them.

My face was wet, sticky with new and old tears, and my throat felt raw.

The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth and nose.

Through the haze, I fought to remember how to *think*, clawing my way toward one clear idea: The Rest Function.

I fumbled for it mentally, forcing the command through the static—but the System answered with an error chime.

[System]: *Error. User not in restful state of mind.*

I blinked, barely processing the words before a broken laugh escaped me.

“No shit, System...” I rasped out between clenched teeth and sobs. “That’s why I *need* the Rest Function, you little shit.”

Gritting my teeth, biting down even harder, I forced another attempt—this time flipping my Ego active before hitting confirm.

Instantly, the edges of my mind cleared, the pain dulling from a full-body firestorm to something merely unbearable. Even then, the sharp stabs still broke through, it was worse than the damn NeuroCorpse I had been force-fed as part of a bona-fide attempt at torture just yesterday.

But at least I could somewhat think again.

So I confirmed the Rest Function one more time, praying to every deity I didn’t believe in that it would stick this time.

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When my eyes finally fluttered open, I was completely disoriented—no sense of time, no idea how long I’d been out. For a brief second, I thought maybe I’d died mid-upgrade and the System had just dumped me somewhere else.

But then the familiar Interface flickered into view in front of me, and I realized my gamble had actually worked.

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

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

“...Oh thank fuck,” I muttered under my breath, the relief short-lived as my brain caught up with the rest of my body.

Two problems hit me almost immediately, if not quite simultaneously.

First, I was still in pain.

Not the mind-shattering, nerve-flaying agony from before—more like a deep, throbbing ache buried in every muscle and tendon. Manageable, sure, but it felt like I’d gone twelve rounds with a professional boxer and lost every single one of them.

My limbs protested even the slightest movement, and my joints popped like dry twigs when I tried to move even as much as a centimetre.

When I recognized the second issue, however, I froze entirely and it made the first feel almost irrelevant.

As my vision had cleared properly, I had realized I wasn't alone in the room any longer.

Valeria was sitting in a chair right beside the bed, her left leg crossed over her right one, her steely-gray eyes locked squarely on me.

And the look she gave me wasn't comforting in the least.

It was the kind of cold, assessing stare a researcher might give to a lab rat, after injecting them with an experimental substance, that had just done something very unexpected.

For a split second, I almost wished I was back in the deep-throes of the Upgrade pain instead...