

Chapter 19 - Wake-Up Call

Slumped into the wheelchair—a piece of furniture I had optimistically thought would be a relic of my past by now—I took a moment to recover from the day's overwhelming stress and fatigue.

It dawned on me that this was as good a time as any to finally tackle the heap of System Notifications I'd been neglecting throughout the last tumultuous hours.

Opening up the G.E.M.A interface, I began to scroll through the notifications, grateful to find they had been conveniently condensed into a more digestible format.

'Thank you, System, for making my life just a little bit easier right now,' I thought, bracing myself for whatever news lay ahead.

[System]: *200xp gained for Ego Attribute.*

[System]: *500xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *400xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.*

[System]: *[Slicing] Skill unlocked.*

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

My eyebrows arched in a combination of surprise and curiosity as I read the last couple of lines, and I found myself murmuring a puzzled, "Huh?"

It was becoming a recurring theme—yet another Skill that hadn't existed in the world of Neon Dragons had now made its appearance in my System. Frankly, I was growing accustomed to these intriguing twists, and they were almost always a welcome addition.

Given that Neon Dragons lacked any hard cap on the number of Perk Trees, Skills, or Abilities one could accrue, discovering new Skills and expanding my repertoire never seemed like a downside.

The Skill in question was [Slicing], and considering the context in which it had been awarded—during my recent high-stakes experience with Dr. Maltrick—I could make an educated guess on what it might entail.

It likely governed one's aptitude for being a slicer, an amalgamation of a surgical maestro, an underground physician, and perhaps even a cyberware specialist of sorts.

'I'll need to take a look at the available Perks to truly grasp what this [Slicing] Skill entails, I think,' I pondered.

'Slicers engage in a wide range of activities, so it's tough to pinpoint the exact focus of the Skill. There's already a [Surgeon] Skill in Neon Dragons, so it would be strange to double-up with this one, no...? Could it be deliberately non-specific? Designed to be a sort of catch-all, gap-filler for a person's particular skill set?'

At the same time, I really couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was maybe reading too much into it.

Nothing I'd encountered thus far indicated that this System was engineered to facilitate optimal skill builds or anything along those lines. Perhaps the Skill was simply a pragmatic reflection of a slicer's broad spectrum of expertise?

Unless I had a direct talk with the enigmatic being, or program, behind this convoluted System—a meeting I was in no rush to arrange, especially given my current, less-than-stellar Attributes and Skills—I was left to speculation and guesswork.

Another problem quickly reared its head concerning the [Slicer] Skill as well: Just how the fuck was I supposed to accrue experience for it?

Opening my own makeshift slicer clinic was laughably out of the question.

I had zero hands-on experience in any facet of slicing—be it surgery, emergency medical intervention, or cyberware modifications.

That left me with the sole option of seeking an apprenticeship under an experienced slicer. This presented its own set of hurdles, however.

Much like my culinary tutelage under Mr. Shori for my [Cooking] Skill, I'd need to find a mentor willing to take me under their wing.

The obvious issue? Slicers were notoriously untrusting individuals, likely a survival trait stemming from their past life experiences and probably a contributing factor to their unconventional career choice in the first place.

For the time being, the [Slicer] Skill remained a dead entry in my skill set. While it might find its moment to shine in the future, I had more pressing concerns demanding my immediate attention.

First and foremost, my Body Attribute and [First-Aid] Skill had revealed themselves to be woefully inadequate for even the most basic level of survival.

It was a sobering realisation: I hadn't been the one under attack, yet I nearly collapsed simply from the strain of getting Gabriel to a slicer. My physical capabilities, as they stood, were completely and utterly unacceptable.

Moreover, if my [First-Aid] Skill had been better honed, there's a high likelihood I could've patched Gabriel up myself, rendering a trip to Dr. Maltrick's clinic entirely unnecessary.

With these reflections in mind, I sketched out my immediate priorities:

Grind out my Body Attribute to at least Level 3, maybe even 4 or 5 and refine my [First-Aid] Skill to become more self-sufficient. Getting the first Perk for [First-Aid] was going to be my imminent goal for now.

Additionally, continue apprenticing under Mr. Shori to work on enhancing my Reflex Attribute and improving my [Knives] and [Cooking] Skills. And lastly, earn and stash away some credits to gradually repay Gabriel for all he's done for me.

Having sifted through all the system notifications and solidified my game plan for the coming days, I turned my attention to domestic damage control. Gabriel's journey through our living room had been something of a blood-soaked odyssey, leaving a grim trail in his wake.

To spare Oliver the shock of a crime-scene-like homecoming, I knew I had to get things cleaned up, and pronto.

Digging out a motley assortment of cleaning supplies from the cabinet beneath our kitchen sink, I set to work.

I tackled the gruesome mural Gabriel had inadvertently painted on the kitchen wall, and then took on the ridiculously difficult task of trying to lift blood stains from our carpet—a carpet which, by the way, was probably never going to be the same. Not that it had been particularly clean before, quite the opposite, but getting blood stains out of carpets was notoriously difficult from what I remembered from my last life.

Oddly enough, as I was elbow-deep in my sanitising endeavours, a System Notification chimed in my head.

'Could this actually be contributing to my Body level? I am getting kinda sweaty here...' I mused to myself, hopeful but sceptical. I paused to check the notification, eyes scanning the text in my cerebral interface.

[System]: *[Maid] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [Maid] Skill.*

A beat of dumbfounded silence hung in the air before I finally erupted, "You've got to be absolutely fucking with me right now, right?"

The words slipped out, laced with an incredulity I couldn't contain.

'Is this for real? A [Maid] Skill? What's next, a [Janitor] or [Dishwasher] Skill? Why the fuck does this even exist in the first place?' My mind was spinning with exasperation at the absurdity of it all.

'Is there some cosmic game-master out there eavesdropping on my thoughts, and did they introduce this ludicrous [Maid] Skill just to taunt me? Hey, if you're listening, System-God, or whatever, how about bestowing some extra Body experience points my way? I could use a little less fragility right about now,' I mused internally.

Of course, I didn't really buy into the notion that some celestial overseer was pulling strings based on my whims, but hey, there's no harm in tossing a plea into the cosmic suggestion box, right?

Shaking off the absurdity, I refocused on my cleaning crusade. Just as I was starting to get into a rhythm, another System Notification intruded upon my thoughts.

[System]: *100xp gained for Body Attribute.*

Once again, I found myself staring, bewildered, at the notification.

'Hold up, what? God? Is that you?'

It was then that my Ego Attribute seemed to boot up, injecting a sense of rational calm into my frazzled psyche.

'No, Sera. There's clearly no divine intervention here. The [Maid] Skill probably just operates under the Body Attribute, and you naturally accumulated some experience points while cleaning. Get your shit together, for fuck sake—or should I say, for your own sake.'

Grumbling to myself, having to chide my own stupid brain for making dumbass assumptions based on absolutely nothing—likely a consequence of my extreme exhaustion, if I had to name a culprit—I continued my cleaning duties for a while longer.

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Roughly half an hour later, I found myself bathed in sweat yet again, and the apartment had taken on a new olfactory identity: A heady cocktail of industrial-strength cleaning chemicals and residual, dissolved blood.

To put it bluntly, the place was fucking rank.

I'd scoured our cabinets for some air freshener, but to no avail. The apartment was woefully understocked in the fragrance department, and I wasn't about to venture out in my current state to rectify that oversight.

On the bright side, my cleaning marathon had contributed a small but welcome chunk of experience to my Body Attribute. In the process, I also discovered that [Maid] was a hybrid-Skill.

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

[System]: *100xp gained for Body Attribute.*

[System]: *100xp gained for Intuition Attribute.*

Yes, it seemed that the life of a [Maid] involved not just a measure of tremendous physical stamina but also some kind of intuitive knack for—what? Sensing dirt's favourite hiding spots? I wasn't entirely clear on what the System was implying, but it did provide me with a straightforward avenue for grinding both my Body and Intuition Attributes in the future.

And so, with a begrudging nod, I made my peace with the existence of the [Maid] Skill for now, filing it under "useful absurdities."

The last act on my docket for the day—given the physical and mental toll the day's events had taken on me—was to prepare my [First-Aid] Skill grind for the coming days.

Setting it up was straightforward enough, especially since I had already deduced that [First-Aid] was more concerned with effective wound treatment rather than the cause of said wounds.

I retreated to the bathroom and, with grim determination, made several incisions on my inner thigh using my combat knife. After that, I meticulously cleaned each gash before applying a generous coating of synth-spray bandage.

My logic was simple: If a single wound could generate a few hundred experience points, then multiple wounds should provide a proportional boost, right?

"Oh right, I've got to remind Oliver we're running low on synth-spray," I mumbled to myself as I exited the bathroom. The bottle was nearly depleted, largely due to the hefty amount I'd used earlier on Gabriel.

I had eased myself back into the wheelchair and kept a watchful eye on Gabriel, who was fast asleep on the couch.

Gabriel had roused briefly during Dr. Maltrick's medical procedures, prompting her to administer a pretty potent anaesthetic to ensure she could complete her work undisturbed. According to her, it was likely to keep him unconscious for the remainder of the day and probably a good chunk of the next.

Her specific, and deeply concerning, phrasing still rang in my ears: "He'll be out like a dead kitten's left paw."

I hadn't really understood what the fuck that meant, or why the left paw was specifically mentioned, but I also really hadn't wanted to think about dead kittens either way, so I had simply accepted it as a strange manner of speech.

I ultimately found it hard to believe that Dr. Maltrick would administer anything to Gabriel that could harm him. For all her quirks and rude manners, she seemed highly competent and keen on maintaining a solid professional relationship with Valeria in particular.

The subject of Valeria—who was technically my mother now—fascinated me immensely. She was like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces that I couldn't fit together no matter how hard I tried.

What was the connection between her and Dr. Maltrick?

Why did the doctor agree to an emergency appointment without demanding extra credentials?

What was the nature of Valeria's corporate job?

Why was her office a no-go zone for the rest of the family?

These questions had continued to swirl around in my mind since the first day, forming an enigma that I couldn't untangle. Despite living under the same roof, Valeria remained a complete mystery to me.

I knew I'd have to unearth at least some answers to these nagging questions. Not just to satisfy my curiosity, but to gauge whether she presented any kind of threat to my well-being.

While I had managed to win her begrudging approval during our first family dinner, I had no illusions about her corporate persona allowing me to loaf around the apartment indefinitely.

Even the original Sera, who seemed to have embodied the rebellious teenage spirit, had certain responsibilities that Valeria expected her to fulfil—and more surprisingly, had actually done so, despite the whole rebellious period.

So, understanding Valeria's expectations of me would be crucial. It was the only way to secure my footing in her household, at least for the foreseeable future.

Regrettably, that investigative quest would have to be put on hold until Valeria decided we were worthy enough for her to make another appearance. As much as I could theorise and speculate, getting to the heart of the matter would require direct interaction with the woman herself.

Sure, I planned to nudge Oliver and Gabriel for any insights they might have, but I wasn't holding my breath for any groundbreaking revelations—and that wasn't just because my lung capacity was like that of a newborn's at the moment.

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Still in the process of recovery, I was perched in my wheelchair when the familiar beep of the front door's biometric lock sounded, followed by the mechanical clunk of it unlocking.

'It's showtime!' I mentally psyched myself up, bracing for Oliver's entrance.

I was silently praying that he wouldn't come through that door oozing blood like Gabriel. I desperately needed something to chalk up in the win column for the day, to make up for the messed up situation with Gabriel.

To my immense relief, the door swung open with its customary creak, and Oliver tiptoed into the apartment as if fearing he'd disturb something—or rather, someone.

His gaze locked onto me almost instantaneously.

I had strategically positioned myself dead-centre in the living room, squarely facing the door—just as I had when awaiting Gabriel's dramatic entrance. Oliver's face instantly morphed from an expression of acute concern to a radiant smile, and I couldn't have been more grateful for that small yet significant victory.

"Hey, Oliver, welcome back! Gabriel's sprawled on the couch, knocked out cold. Dr. Maltrick administered something pretty potent to keep him in la-la land for a good while, according to her. So, how was the daily grind?" I greeted him warmly, subtly stalling for just the right moment to pull back the curtain on my well-prepared grand reveal.

The smile that had overtaken Oliver's worried expression seemed to lighten the room. He stepped further inside, setting down his bag and shrugging off his coat. "What happened to Gabriel?"

His eyes shifted from me to his unconscious son on the couch, concerned etching lines back onto his forehead.

"To be honest, I didn't have a chance to ask him. He was in bad shape when he got here. Stab wounds, a large cut across his abdomen, and some heavy bruising. I had to call Dr. Maltrick ASAP," I said candidly. I figured he'd piece together what likely happened soon enough, so there was no point in sugarcoating it.

His eyes widened, and for the first time since I'd known him, I saw something that looked like genuine anger flash across his face. Then he took a deep breath, and just like that, he was composed again.

"You did a really good job looking after your big brother, Sera," he said, his voice tinged with relief as he briefly walked over to take a closer look at Gabriel.

Satisfied that his son was indeed breathing and safe for the moment, Oliver made his way toward the kitchen. "Work was as hectic as usual. Those issues I mentioned last time we spoke about my job haven't been fully resolved, but we're making progress, slowly but surely," he said, unzipping the bag he'd brought with him.

Seizing the moment, I said, "Let me help you with that," and set my plan into motion.

As Oliver's back was turned to me, focused on unpacking the array of groceries and household items from his bag, I quietly pressed the brakes off the wheelchair. My fingers gently clenched the armrests for a moment before I lifted myself up. Taking a silent breath, I stood and began walking toward the kitchen, each step feeling like a victory.

I joined Oliver at the counter, reaching for one of the food boxes he had brought and placing it neatly in its designated spot. We moved in a sort of choreographed domesticity, the rhythm of putting things away adding a layer of normalcy to an otherwise chaotic day.

"That smells good," Oliver commented as his eyes caught the sight of the food boxes from Mr. Shori's Stall, neatly stacked on the dining table. "Where did those come from?"

"Got them earlier today," I answered nonchalantly, stacking a box of tissues next to its fellows.

His eyes widened, a sudden surge of concern washing over his face. "You left the apartment? When? Do you know how *dangerous* that is?"

Feeling a bit dumbfounded that he was looking directly at me—standing next to him, no less—but not really grasping the full picture, I quipped, "Well, I had the urge to stretch my legs a bit, y'know?"

For a second, confusion furrowed his brow; then, like a lightbulb flickering on, realisation dawned on his face. His eyes dropped to my legs and then shot back up to meet my gaze. "Your legs... You're standing! You're actually standing and walking, Sera!"

That's right, the reality of the moment finally settled in for the both of us.

Oliver's eyes continued to oscillate between disbelief and sheer joy, almost as if he was afraid that any sudden movement would dispel the reality before him. He approached me cautiously, stepping gingerly as if worried that a faster pace might make me crumble to the floor.

"Sera, how—? When—? You're walking, but how?!" His words tumbled out in fragments, a jumbled mix of emotion and confusion.

Feeling quite pleased that my reveal had the impact I was aiming for, I couldn't help but offer a quip. "Well, when Gabriel came home like that, somebody had to 'step-up,' y'know?"

He looked at me blankly for a moment before letting out a groan. "You're not helping me here, Sera"

His concern shifted gears as he drew closer, his voice tinged with that overbearing-dad quality I'd rarely witnessed. "Are you okay, though? Don't push yourself too hard. The doctors said it'd be months before—"

I interrupted, laying out the events of the day to put his mind at ease. "I've been cautious, Dad. I went down to the 16th Floor earlier, met a vendor named Mr. Shori. Got some food, took in some fresh air—well, as fresh as mega building air can be, I guess. I've planned it as a part of my daily routine to acclimate myself back into the real world, bit by bit."

His eyes scanned my face, as if searching for any sign of strain or discomfort, before finally letting out a sigh of relief. "Alright, just promise me you'll be careful, okay? We've had enough shocks for one day."

"And you promise to be less of an overprotective dad?" I shot back with a grin.

Oliver chuckled, his initial disbelief melting into a warmth that filled the room. "No promises there. But for now, let's put away this stuff. And then maybe, we can both sit down. I can tell that we definitely both need it."

As we resumed our kitchen duties, the tension of the day seemed to dissolve, leaving in its wake a new, comfortable and unspoken bond between the two of us—something I hadn't intended with my little reveal, but gladly took as a bonus without complaint.

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Roughly an hour later, Oliver and I found ourselves seated at the dinner table, a rare moment of calm in a day that had been anything but. Gabriel was still deep in his drug-induced slumber, courtesy of Dr. Maltrick's potent pharmaceuticals, rendering it a father-daughter evening for the first time in what felt like forever—actually, it quite literally was the first time ever, unless we counted the drive home from the hospital.

In a sentimental gesture, Oliver had procured original Sera's favourite dish as a nod to my role in potentially saving Gabriel's life earlier. What graced our table were peculiar roasted meatballs, each encased in an enigmatic, crunchy shell and generously smothered with a complex sauce that managed to be both sweet and savoury, tinted a rich hue of red-brown.

Summoning the will to overlook the questionable origins of both the meat and the distinctive crunchy breading, I took a hesitant bite. I was immediately rewarded; the flavour was astonishingly good.

It seemed original Sera's palate hadn't diverged much from mine—these meatballs were downright delicious.

As I savoured each ball, I found myself mentally reciting a mantra to maintain my culinary equilibrium. *'You'll have to adapt to this cyberpunk food sooner or later, Sera. Why not start with something genuinely tasty? Forget the absence of traditional agriculture for the breading or the lack of farm-raised livestock for the meat. Just focus on the flavour; the rest is inconsequential.'*

And so, fortified by this mental pep talk and focusing hard on not thinking about it too much, I gleefully continued to devour the crunchy, enigmatic meatballs. As I immersed myself in the exotic yet comforting flavours of the meatballs, I couldn't help but notice Oliver's pensive demeanour.

His eyes oscillated between me and the sleeping form of Gabriel sprawled out on the couch, lost in some medicated dreamscape. The emotional weight of the day was written all over his face, etched into each line and furrow—something I could intimately understand.

The rest of the dinner passed in a blur, with neither of us feeling particularly talkative.

Conversation was sparse; it was as if words would cheapen the shared relief we felt. We were both spent, quietly thankful that the day had ended on a relatively positive note, considering its chaotic nature.

Once the dinner was over, Oliver took the lead in clearing the table, while I suggested we use the wheelchair to move the still-unconscious Gabriel into his bed.

Oliver nodded appreciatively at the idea and carefully transferred his son from the couch, situating him comfortably in the wheelchair before wheeling him to the shared room that Gabriel and I occupied. After ensuring Gabriel was safely ensconced in his bed, Oliver stepped out, leaving me alone—save for the soft snoring of my still-unaware brother.

Seated there in the quietude, I took a few moments to think about the following day.

Today had served as an urgent wake-up call, a jarring reminder that my foremost priorities needed to be survival and acclimation to this unfamiliar world. I couldn't afford the luxury of existential musings or sentimental journeys down memory lane; not when there were vital skills to master and an understanding of this new environment to gain.

A sense of urgency had truly gripped me, urging me to carefully plan out my agenda for the upcoming day, determined not to squander any time that could be spent 'grinding,' so to speak.

It was a world fraught with danger and uncertainty, and I was hell-bent on equipping myself with the basic necessities for survival before venturing into the complexities of life here.

'Putting nightly [Meditation] grinding and SPG-shard usage on hold seems like the best course of action for now. I need to capitalise on the Bonus XP from the Rest-Function to expedite my Body Attribute's growth. That's non-negotiable. Every scrap of that Bonus XP will funnel directly into boosting my Body stats while I level up the rest organically,' I firmly decided, my thoughts coalescing into a mental checklist of essential tasks and goals.

'Upon waking, the first item on the agenda will be some rudimentary body-weight exercises, preceded by an assessment of my [First-Aid] grind. Push-ups, squats, and perhaps a few lunges should offer a satisfactory ROI on stamina without overtaxing me. I don't want to overreach, particularly since I'm planning to incorporate some corridor-running to get a jumpstart on unlocking [Athletics]. Maybe even [Acrobatics]... Well, that's likely a pursuit for when my Body attribute reaches level 2 or higher. Any premature vaulting or leaping could snap my frail little limbs like twigs at this stage,' I mentally strategized, cautiously setting boundaries.

Pleased with this foundational plan, I shifted my thoughts toward mapping out the rest of the day, aiming to establish a sustainable, effective routine.

After all, the beauty of grinding often lay in the repetitiveness of routines.

'Revisiting Mr. Shori's stall is a no-brainer, really. The sheer volume of experience points on the table is too significant to overlook. Plus, I genuinely enjoyed my time there today. I can grind out some [Knives], [Cooking], Reflex, Body, Intuition and maybe even, as much as I hate to remember that it exists, [Maid] experience as well. All while pocketing some credits and enjoying genuinely tasty food. It's a veritable goldmine of a grind spot; neglecting it would be straight up stupid,' I concluded, the prospect already ingraining itself as a non-negotiable part of my soon-to-be daily regimen.

'Last but not least, upon returning home, I'll have to gauge my physical state. If I'm utterly spent, then some [Programming] with the SGP-shard would be a productive wind-down. Otherwise, it's back to pounding the pavement and tackling more body-weight exercises until I've wrung every last drop out of my stamina. And let's not forget: Maintaining a strict bedtime is non-negotiable. I need a full eight-hour window for the Rest Function to maximise that delicious, delicious Bonus XP. No late-night shenanigans, Sera—you're on the clock!'

I resolved, mentally setting rules and reining in any potential impulses for nocturnal distractions.

Having finalised my mental game plan for the day ahead, it felt like the stage was set for an epic training montage. I could almost hear the iconic strains of "Eye of the Tiger" echoing in the furthest corners of my consciousness.

With a sense of dramatic flair, I activated the Rest Function and meticulously entered a full eight hours—down to the second. After mentally double-checking and confirming the time, I braced myself before confirming the input.

The real grind was about to begin...