

Chapter 14 - First Steps

As I peered into the dizzying assortment of Perks displayed in my cerebral interface, I was gripped by a sense of vertigo. Waiting until the [Programming] Perks were also available for selection had seemed like a smart move, but now I was faced with the paralysing reality of too many choices.

"In a video game, this would be easy-peasy," I muttered to myself. "You pick whatever aligns with your build, no sweat. But this—this isn't a game. This is the foundation of my life now. I have to strategize for survival, figure out how to earn credits, protect my family... the stakes are monumental."

Drawing in a stabilising breath, I physically slapped both cheeks to snap myself back to the moment. "Alright, Sera, get it together. Time to put on your gamer goggles and dissect this labyrinth."

As the first order of business, I zeroed in on the [Juggling] Skill tree. [Ambidexterity] was already a foregone conclusion, so I promptly selected it. A pop-up window appeared to confirm my choice, and with a sense of finality, I tapped "OK."

A peculiar tingling sensation cascaded through my mind, immediately honing my awareness onto my left arm and hand. It felt as though that limb had been slumbering in a numb, pins-and-needles haze for my entire existence—across two lifetimes, no less—and had just jolted awake.

For a moment, I minimised my cerebral interface to focus solely on this newfound phenomenon. My eyes locked onto my left hand as I opened and closed it, flexing the fingers experimentally.

The motions felt strange, almost alien, yet my brain was simultaneously insisting that this was utterly, unequivocally normal. It was a surreal experience, like discovering a room in your house that you'd lived in for years but never knew existed.

I marvelled at the peculiar normality of it all, as my newly ambidextrous hand closed into a fist and then relaxed, each movement a reminder of the bewildering and sudden shift in my body's and brain's symmetry and capability of handling that had just occurred.

While confined to my bed and lacking any proper tools to rigorously test my new ambidextrous abilities, I decided to simply use my left hand to pull the blanket over myself.

The sensation was bizarre but paradoxically commonplace. It felt as though I had always used my left hand for such tasks, even though I was acutely aware that was far from the truth.

'This is absolutely insane... but incredibly awesome,' I mused, the corners of my mouth curling into a gleeful smile.

To gain instant ambidexterity at the mere press of a metaphorical button? The entire System was patently absurd, verging on the unbelievable, but who was I to gripe? Certainly not when it was bestowing upon me such invaluable abilities!

With the relatively straightforward decision of [Ambidexterity] behind me, I found myself plunged back into the mire of indecision: the daunting task of selecting my remaining Perks.

My eyes gravitated toward the [Knives] category, almost as if guided by an inexplicable instinct.

'All these Perks are undeniably compelling, but only one feels like a daily lifesaver,' I mentally deliberated. *'Sure, [Double Slice] and [Silent Takedown] are tempting, especially if I find myself embroiled in any cloak-and-dagger operations in the future. But for the present, [Sharpening] clinches it for sure.'* I sounded out my choice internally, scrutinising for any twinge of regret.

To my relief, there was none.

The rationale behind selecting [Sharpening] was pragmatic—it would provide a significant edge, pun very much intended, to my everyday life outside the apartment.

It was a kind of universal utility.

I couldn't always guarantee I'd have access to my knife if things went south. The ability to turn practically any object into a lethally sharp implement, even for just one use, was undeniably invaluable.

As for the other tantalising options, they each came with their own set of caveats.

Take [Mirror's Edge], for instance, which would require me to be brandishing a knife at the precise moment a bullet came hurtling my way. Firstly, I had no intention of being in a situation where bullets were involved—big red flag there. Secondly, the odds of me having a knife in hand just as some trigger-happy thug decided to shoot seemed laughably improbable.

It was too situationally constrained to be my go-to Perk at this stage, especially considering I had no plans to audition for knife-vs-gun duels in the near future.

Besides, similar Perks lurked within other categories like [Blades], [Acrobatics], and the various defence-oriented trees focusing on the different types of armour in Neon Dragons. So, all things considered, I didn't feel like I was sacrificing much by forgoing it for now.

With a decisive click and a following prompt for confirmation, I locked in my [Sharpening] Perk.

Of course, I'd have to delay putting it to the test until later in the day, given that I wasn't exactly keen on keeping sharp objects within arm's reach while ensconced in my bed. I may have enjoyed myself some edge in a lot of respects, but not so much that it encroached on my sacred sleep sanctuary in a literal sense.

With that decision squared away, my gaze shifted to the [Throwing] Perk options.

The mental fog of indecision had slowly lifted with my previous choices; my strategy was crystallising.

[Homing Beacon] stood out as the indisputable winner of my new strategy.

It was blissfully uncomplicated, requiring nothing more than my ability to hurl an object in someone's general direction. Whether that object was a pebble, a blade, a live grenade, or even one of my trusty sock balls—each would serve as an effective conduit for the Perk.

Just like [Sharpening], [Homing Beacon] seemed to offer a wider spectrum of applications beyond the strictly lethal or incapacitating. While I hadn't yet pieced together exactly how a tracking ability would factor into my daily life, the sheer potential was tantalising enough.

Sure, [Gravity Defiant] and [Piercing Projectile] remained alluring prospects for the future. Especially since throwing was a playstyle I genuinely relished in my gaming endeavours.

But for the time being, the streets of Neo Avalis were still a bit too dicey for me to be actively hunting for confrontations. That could wait; I had more immediate needs, and [Homing Beacon] fitted that bill perfectly.

With a sense of determination, I swiftly made my selection and confirmed it, barely pausing to second-guess myself.

It was then that I recognized I was down to my final pick: The [Meditation] Perk.

'Wow, that escalated quickly. The rush of power-up choices is almost intoxicating,' I thought, relishing the sheer joy of downloading superhuman, downright physics-defying, abilities straight into my physical being.

At first, [Zen State] had been a top contender for my [Meditation] Perk.

The logic was simple: Panic and fear were notorious for being both mind and body assassins. But as I reviewed the benefits of the Ego Attribute and remembered various other Skill trees in the game, it became evident that there were multiple overlapping Perks—some even more potent and useful than [Zen State].

So, despite its allure, I shelved [Zen State]. It would be a short-sighted use of my limited early Perk points to invest in something I could potentially outgrow in the near to moderate future.

[Emotional Balance] seemed like a strong option, until I considered the implications for my budding relationship with Gabriel. The Perk promised to even out all emotions, not just the inconvenient ones.

Essentially, it was a gateway Perk to emotional detachment, ideal for those in-game murder-hobos who wanted to sidestep the mental repercussions of a high body count.

I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't just a game; this was my life—my real, actual life. A small but monumentally important detail that I couldn't afford to overlook at any moment.

[Astral Projection] seemed more aligned with an Operator role, which left me with [Serenity] as my last viable option. Unexpectedly, it dovetailed quite well with my previous Perk choices.

It was straightforward, incredibly flexible in its applicability, and offered an astounding level of everyday utility. As long as I could secure a mere minute to meditate, I'd be immune to bleeding out or succumbing to poison.

It was a powerful example to the concept of mind-over-matter, and I was all in for it.

After locking in [Serenity] and confirming my choice, I found myself suddenly finished with my Perk-selection whirlwind. What had initially seemed like an insurmountable task—choosing just four from a kaleidoscopic array of tempting options—had turned into an adrenaline-charged experience from the moment I selected the first one.

'Shit, this is addictive. Like, dangerously addictive or exhilaratingly so—I can't decide,' I pondered, feeling both exhilaration and a hint of trepidation at the thought of earning more Perk points through copious amounts of grinding in my near future.

Glancing at the clock displayed on my interface, I noticed I still had a generous two hours before my regular wake-up time with Gabriel.

'Perfect opportunity to try out [Serenity],' I thought, deciding on a test run.

With a bizarre blend of trepidation and curiosity, I stuck my right-hand pinky finger into my mouth and bit down hard.

'Holy hell, that's painful! The days of being numb to this kind of stuff are clearly in the rearview mirror—and good riddance,' I grimaced as a thin stream of blood seeped from the freshly torn skin.

'Okay, let's do this meditation thing,' I muttered, still nursing my wounded finger. While the Perk description had been a bit vague on the mechanics, it seemed that all I had to do was engage in a minute of meditation for the benefits to kick in.

At least, that's how it should work in theory.

Drawing in several deep, centering breaths and sweeping my thoughts to the side, I slid into a meditative stance with remarkable ease. The copious hours I'd invested in honing my [Meditation] skill over the previous days had evidently left their mark on my mental landscape; probably for the better.

However, there was one significant hiccup with my newfound [Serenity] Perk: The inability to monitor time while in the depths of meditation.

Counting seconds would contradict the very essence of my meditative practice, which was predicated on total mental stillness and rhythmic breathing. So, it seemed I'd have to rely on an educated guess to gauge when 60 seconds had elapsed—a relatively small window of time, I rationalised.

But then, in a twist I hadn't anticipated, I sensed the exact moment the Perk triggered. A palpable shift, almost as if a tranquil wave had washed over me, told me that [Serenity] had kicked in.

Opening my eyes and breaking my meditative trance, I immediately turned my gaze to the pinky finger I had savagely bitten just moments before. What I saw left me genuinely amazed.

The lacerations, once jagged and weeping droplets of blood, now appeared sealed. It was as if an invisible suture had knit the skin back together. There wasn't a trace of residual blood; even the beads of crimson that had begun to clot around the wound had vanished.

It was pristine, unblemished—like a small-scale restoration project completed to perfection.

The [Serenity] Perk hadn't just staunched the bleeding; it had seemingly erased the evidence of any physical trauma, stopping any would-be infections or poisons in their tracks. I flexed the finger cautiously, half-expecting a latent throb of pain, but felt nothing of the sort.

It was back to its optimal state, as if the biting incident had never occurred.

'Wow, talk about a real-time undo button for physical injuries,' I thought, both exhilarated and a touch disoriented by this surreal development. 'I doubt it would work the same way if, say, I got my arm shot off or my heart blown apart, but I'm not inclined to test those, quite yet. Needless to say, I'm more than impressed with you [Serenity]!'

With another two hours to kill until day-time, I decided to simply continue meditating until Gabriel was bound to knock on the metal sheet between our sides.

I could never get enough Ego and Intuition experience!

Today was also slated to be a momentous one, so a bit of relaxing meditation before the day started would not go awry. After all, I had planned to finally get my Body to 1 and leave the wheelchair—and subsequently, the apartment—for the very first time!

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The chime of earned experience—200xp for both Intuition and Ego—popped up in my notifications just as the unmistakable knock of Gabriel resonated through the room.

"I'm up! About to get changed!" I called out, already mentally prepared for the day ahead.

I swiftly reached for the ensemble of my favourite clothes that I had thoughtfully laid out the night before—a meticulous preparation meant to maximise my confidence and comfort for the day ahead.

Each garment was chosen with care, embodying my personal style and the sense of empowerment I wanted to radiate—well, as far as I could with Sera's extremely limited wardrobe, that was.

Today was slated to be a momentous day, after all, and if experience had taught me anything, it was that looking my best had a funny way of making me feel invincible. And on a day like this, I intended to feel as formidable and at ease as humanly possible.

Within the limited options of Sera's cyberpunk-infused, teen goth wardrobe, the pieces I had chosen stood out like jewels in a treasure chest.

My eyes fell on the sleek, black, faux-leather pants—accented with zippers and steel rings that gave it an industrial edge, a bit of raw aesthetic that screamed teenage defiance.

To pair with it, I picked a distressed, charcoal tank top that bore digital art designs, faded but still defiantly colourful in a spectrum of neon—purples, greens, and blues—that mirrored the lit skyscrapers of Neo Avalis at night.

Around my waist, I fastened a utility belt that was as much about fashion as it was about function; it had pouches that could carry anything from spare change to tech gadgets.

My footwear was a no-brainer as well, mostly because Sera only owned exactly one pair of boots: A pair of calf-high, lace-up combat boots, their soles thick and chunky, ideal for the uneven, sometimes treacherous terrain of the city's underbelly—or so I figured.

And then, the pièce de résistance: A lightweight, ebony trench coat, flowing like dark water and equipped with hidden compartments for my gear. Its collar was adorned with understated LEDs, subtle enough not to scream 'look at me,' but bright enough to make a statement, emitting a low, ghostly azure glow.

As I dressed, I couldn't help but notice the signs of age, wear, and tear on each piece of clothing.

The faux-leather pants had scuff marks and creases, their zippers and steel rings a little less shiny than they once might have been. The distressed tank top was living up to its name even more now; the digital art design, though vibrant, was clearly faded from repeated washes. Even my combat boots, while structurally sound, showed the scars of many an urban skirmish: Scratches on the leather, the soles slightly worn down.

The coat was no exception. As much as I adored it, the fabric was visibly aged, its once-ebony hue now a shade lighter, almost like charcoal, and the seams showed hints of fraying. The LEDs in the collar, though still functional, didn't glow as brightly as they probably once had.

Each article of clothing, in its own way, whispered stories of days past, of experiences that had weathered it.

Putting it all on, I couldn't shake the feeling that it was time to invest in a new set of gear soon. While I loved the personality these worn pieces gave me, functional integrity was

essential in a world as ruthless as Neo Avalis. Practicality always had to come first, especially in a life teetering on the edge of danger at almost every turn.

Despite the aged state of my outfit, I felt the material envelop me in a familiar embrace, contouring to my body like an old friend.

I was armoured not just with fabric and leather, but also with the intangible essence of my past self and the original Sera herself. The edgy teenager in me rejoiced at the familiarity, but the pragmatist recognized the necessity for future change.

Today, I didn't just plan to navigate through my challenges; I planned to *own* them. And dressed like this, failure wasn't even in my vocabulary!

Brimming with a burst of newfound energy, I didn't even give Gabriel the chance to assist me into my wheelchair.

As eager as I was, the process of manoeuvring myself into that antiquated piece of mobility equipment quickly deflated my bubble of invincibility. The wheelchair's squeaky wheels and faded upholstery were a sobering reminder of my limitations.

'*Soon, Sera. Soon,*' I mentally assured myself, just as Gabriel's knuckles rapped lightly against the makeshift sheet that served as a room divider, signalling his intention to come over and help.

"Already in it!" I cheerfully called out, my face stretched into a wide grin as I rolled past him, surprising him with my newfound independence.

His eyes widened, then filled with unrestrained joy. "Whoa, you can get in yourself now?! That's fucking amazing, sis!" he exclaimed.

The sheer delight that lit up his face made him resemble nothing less than an exuberant golden retriever. And honestly, that boundless positivity was one of the things I cherished most about him so far.

"I've been grinding those exercises like there's no tomorrow, Gabe! Mark my words, I'll be ditching this wheelchair way sooner than you expect," I shot back, my voice tinged with a mix of pride and defiance. Hey, I wasn't lying now, was I?

Gabe's eyes met mine, filled with a blend of optimism and caution. "I'm genuinely stoked to see you back on your feet, Sera. Really, I am. But please, pace yourself. You know how you can get carried away—I don't need to remind you of the sockball incident now, do I? Last thing you need is a torn ligament or some such setting you back, okay?" His voice carried that signature note of big-brotherly concern, a morning ritual of ours that somehow managed to be both comforting and slightly annoying.

"You bet! No overexertion, cross my heart!" I assured him, throwing my hand over my chest for added dramatic effect. It was a promise I fully intended to keep. After all, I could simply rest a couple of hours to fully reinstate myself. No room for overdoing things here!

After bidding Gabriel goodbye, following our routine exchange of morning greetings, I found myself alone in our compact apartment.

'It's Morbin time!' I cheerfully thought, only to cringe internally so hard I felt my soul momentarily leave my body. Okay, Gabe, you were right—I did manage to overdo something after all! I'm sorry for being such a bad sister!

Shaking off my brief stint with certain, cringe-related, death, I wheeled myself to the centre of our modest living room. Ever since my Body Attribute had bottomed out at zero, I'd moved my exercise regimen off the couch to this central spot. It had become my de facto gym floor, and I was more than ready to jump into today's workout.

Fueled by an intense surge of energy—thank adrenaline for that—I threw myself wholeheartedly into my exercise routine.

It was as if the universe sensed my urgency: Just five minutes in, my interface chimed with the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. Objectively, it was identical to every other notification chime I'd received, but this one tasted like victory dipped in honey.

My eyes darted to the incoming notifications:

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

[System]: *Body Attribute has reached 1.*

I felt the transformation instantaneously, like the flicking of some divine switch.

The sensation that swept through me was nothing short of electrifying, as if an unseen force had unleashed a cascade of raw energy into every fibre of my being. It was like receiving a full-body firmware update, courtesy of the G.E.M.A. System.

I could feel each muscle fibre, sinew, and tendon reconfiguring itself, the atrophied tissues suddenly pulsing with newfound vitality.

It was incredible but also disorienting.

There was a sensation of stretching, of tissues expanding and filling out. I was still far from what one might call 'healthy,' still alarmingly thin, downright anorexic, but the skeletal rigidity that had plagued me was softening, giving way to a bit of flexibility I hadn't felt in what felt like a lifetime.

As I took a deep breath, the expansion of my lungs felt fuller, less restricted.

It was as if someone had finally greased the rusty hinges of my respiratory system. Before, every inhalation had been a concerted effort, a deliberate pull against the weight of my weakened state. Now, air flowed in and out more freely, each breath invigorating rather than exhausting.

My arms, previously limp and feeble, felt lighter as I lifted them.

I flexed my fingers and rotated my wrists, the range of motion noticeably improved. Mundane movements I had taken for granted once upon a time but had become herculean tasks—like simply lifting my arm or flexing my fingers—were now very firmly within my grasp again.

I wouldn't be winning arm-wrestling matches anytime soon, but the simple freedom to move without pain or extreme effort was elating. This was almost assuredly going to improve my [Juggling], [Throwing] and [Knives] grinds in the future as well, which had very much suffered from the severely atrophied state my body had been in.

I leaned back in my wheelchair, savouring the small but monumental victory.

To anyone else, these changes might have seemed negligible. But for me, moving from Body 0 to Body 1 was a quantum leap, a first step on the path to reclaiming my life—or claiming it, in the first place.

With a pulsating blend of excitement and apprehension swirling within me, I clenched the armrests of my wheelchair and took a moment to mentally prepare myself. This chair had been both my cage and my sanctuary since the day I'd awakened in this new world, confined to its moulded contours.

But today, it felt more like a launchpad.

Inhaling deeply, I began to shift my weight forward, feeling my newly rejuvenated muscles quiver in anticipation. I reminded myself to go slow, to not let excitement make me reckless. My heart was pounding so loudly in my chest that it felt like a separate entity, urging me on. I had to consciously temper my breathing, steadying my rapid pulse.

Very slowly, I pushed off the armrests, my arms trembling but holding firm, my fingers white-knuckled. It was a peculiar struggle, like fighting through an invisible resistance. My body was unaccustomed to verticality, and I could feel each muscle group engaging, faltering, then stabilising as I continued to rise.

It was as if the System had uploaded a set of cheat codes directly into my muscle memory, giving me a tutorial on 'How to Stand 101' in real-time.

And then, in a moment that felt simultaneously like an eternity and a split-second, I was up.

Actually standing.

My legs wobbled beneath me like a newborn deer's, but they held. I was upright, free from the wheeled contraption that had defined my existence for what felt like way too long.

A wild, exhilarating rush of emotions swept over me—victory, liberation, and a taste of the independence I'd so dearly missed. It felt like breaking the surface after being underwater for too long, gulping in lungfuls of freedom. My eyes brimmed with tears, but they were tears of unadulterated joy.

I took a cautious step forward, each footfall a minor miracle.

The floor beneath me seemed to hum in resonance with my triumph, or maybe that was just my own trembling body. I couldn't contain a giddy laugh, a burst of sound that was as much a release of pent-up frustrations as it was an expression of sheer happiness.

For the first time in this new world, I was standing on my own two feet—literally and metaphorically—and the feeling was intoxicating. I knew I had a long road ahead, but right now, in this monumental instant, the possibilities seemed *endless*.

After that exhilarating first taste of freedom, I had to force myself back into the wheelchair to catch my breath and collect my scattered emotions. Overwhelmed and still trembling with excitement, I allowed myself those precious few minutes to recalibrate.

It was a very small concession to make, given the giant leap I had just taken.

Before long, though, I was up again, as if magnetically repelled from that once-unyielding seat. Liberated from its wheels and armrests, I revelled in my newly reclaimed autonomy. Initially, I didn't do anything particularly grandiose. I simply wandered around the apartment, taking in the subtle changes in viewpoint that standing afforded me.

The landscape of my home had shifted dramatically.

Everything was suddenly within easier reach, more accessible. In retrospect, it was glaringly obvious why: This space was not designed with wheelchair accessibility in mind.

Countertops that had loomed just out of reach were now approachable; narrow passages that had been a nightmarish gauntlet for my wheelchair seemed to open up. I could hardly even recognize the patches on the carpet that used to snag my wheels, let alone be bothered by them.

Emboldened, I made my way into the bedroom I shared with Gabriel, my steps still hesitant but increasingly sure.

Slipping on the coat—my edgy, super cool coat—I attached the combat knife to my toolbelt with a sense of ceremony. This was me gearing up for a new chapter, a reentry into the world outside.

Neo Avalis was about to see a new Sera, albeit one with legs still adjusting to their newfound strength, arms that felt like they'd been cooked to a perfect al-dente, and stamina that still had a long way to go.

But I was adamant. Today was not the day for half measures.

On this momentous occasion, I was determined to step out of our apartment, even if it was just for a few exploratory minutes. It was a declaration, a promise to myself: I was back, and I was only moving forward from here.

I made my way to the apartment's front door, each step a blend of cautious deliberation and swelling anticipation. Until now, this threshold had been the border of my known universe within Neon Dragons, save for a hazy, barely-remembered stint in the hospital at the very beginning.

Oddly enough, the door seemed to yield too easily, as if betraying the significance of the moment. Instead of the heralding fanfare or a choir of cherubs that my dramatic side almost wished for, the door emitted a subdued hiss as it slid smoothly into its recess in the left wall.

It felt strangely anticlimactic, yet the quiet did little to dampen my mounting excitement.

'Here goes nothing,' I thought, a wave of exhilaration tinged with a hint of nervousness surging through me. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I stepped over the threshold with a sense of purpose, even if my legs still quivered ever so slightly.

And just like that, for the first time, I was officially outside the confines of the apartment.

The world of Neon Dragons and the city of Neo Avalis now lay before me, and I couldn't help but think that it was *about damn time* it met the new Sera...