

Chapter 20 - New Routine

My eyes fluttered open immediately, sending me into the usual state of utter confusion for a brief moment.

'*Yep, that's never gonna go away,*' I quietly confirmed to myself, as the residual effects of the Rest Function rapidly wore off.

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

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

Having confirmed the successful acquisition of the very valuable Bonus XP, I got myself ready for the day with a nice, hot and steamy shower.

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I made a quick detour to check on Gabriel, who was still serenely snoring away, before retreating into the bathroom, first-aid supplies and the day's clothes in tow.

However, as I assessed the condition of my wounds, it hit me—my carefully crafted plans had a glaring flaw.

"Ah, damn it," I muttered to myself, contemplating the quandary I found myself in.

The wounds had completely vanished, thanks to the Rest Function's mysterious healing abilities. On one hand, the Rest Function was crucial for amassing Bonus XP, allowing me to rapidly elevate my Body Attribute. But on the other, resting for longer than approximately four to five hours would negate all the prep work I had done for grinding my [First-Aid] Skill.

Caught in this paradox, I realised I didn't have a clean solution at the moment. There might have been other avenues to gain Bonus XP in Neon Dragons, but those remained securely locked away from my current reach.

'*For now, I suppose [First-Aid] will take a backseat,*' I concluded. '*I'll pour my energy into fortifying my Body Attribute. Once that's secure, I'll use the nighttime hours for [Programming] and [Meditation], gradually working up my [First-Aid] skillset.*'

Resigned but resolute, I donned my selected attire for the day and neatly stowed away the now-redundant first-aid supplies, before heading towards the living room.

Evidently, Oliver had already vacated the apartment, a common practice he seemed to maintain well before either Gabriel or I stirred from sleep.

"Alright, let's kickstart this Body grind," I mumbled, making a beeline for a specific section of carpet I had diligently cleaned the previous day during my bout of vigorous cleaning.

Push-ups, sit-ups, and similar exercises were not something I was willing to do on a floor marred by grime and stains. Since I was already on a cleaning spree to erase the remnants

of Gabriel's bloody mishap, I'd extended my efforts to sanitise a small square of carpet designated for my impending grind sessions.

Admittedly, I felt a ripple of pride at my foresight—a small triumph, but meaningful nonetheless.

I positioned myself on the carpet, still speckled with ingrained dirt but significantly cleaner than the surrounding area, bracing for my inaugural set of push-ups in this unfamiliar body.

My muscles were woefully atrophied, but that was as much an issue as it was a workaround.

Being remarkably weak also meant I was remarkably light, making me optimistic that I could manage at least a handful of push-ups. All things considered, my physical weaknesses were somewhat proportional to my strengths, albeit scant as they were.

Having mentally configured the Bonus XP to funnel exclusively into my Body Attribute—just in case a [Push-Up] Skill or something similar existed—I initiated my very first push-up.

As I strained to lift myself back to the starting position, letting out an involuntary grunt, I realised the exertion required was more challenging than I had initially anticipated.

Right on cue, a cascade of System Notifications chimed in my consciousness.

[System]: *200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 500xp.*

[System]: *Body Attribute has reached 2.*

Almost instantaneously, I felt the G.E.M.A System go to work, overhauling my frail physique.

It was an odd, tingling sensation that surged through me, like electricity coursing through circuitry, yet profoundly organic. My atrophied muscles began to fill out, redefining themselves in real-time. The transformation was far from dramatic; I was still thin, but no longer emaciated to the point of anorexia. Weak, but noticeably less so than just moments ago.

I became acutely aware of subtle differences in how my body functioned.

Breathing felt smoother, as if my lungs had just received a tune-up, similar to how it had felt easier to breathe when I went from 0 to 1. The air flowed effortlessly through my nostrils and filled my lungs more completely.

My movements, too, were more fluid.

As I lifted my arms and took a step, it felt like my joints had been lubricated and my tendons fortified. Everything was just a touch more responsive, slightly more agile.

Even my posture seemed to automatically adjust itself to a more upright alignment, without the hunched discomfort I was accustomed to.

I flexed my fingers, intrigued by the newfound strength I felt in even that simple gesture.

It was as though the system had recalibrated the hardware of my body, optimising it for better performance. It was invigorating, like shedding a layer of physical inhibition I had struggled with for years. I couldn't help but marvel once again at the potent and immediate effects of just a single point increase in my Body Attribute—because this was only the beginning.

Revitalised by the startling yet welcome transformation in my physique, I eagerly dropped back down to the slightly grimy carpet to resume my morning exercises. Mindful not to push myself to the point of exhaustion—I had grand plans to unlock [Athletics] later in the day—I sank into the preparatory stance for another set of push-ups.

The shift in my capabilities was nothing short of astonishing.

Mere moments before, a single push-up had left me panting and grimacing; now, I effortlessly executed over a dozen, only feeling the burn towards the end.

'*This System is absolutely ridiculous,*' I mused during one of my short rest periods, taking advantage of the time to catch my breath. I glanced at the digital clock I had set up to manage my regimen. Another half-hour remained before I would transition from my bodyweight exercises to my quest to unlock the [Athletics] Skill.

The excitement buzzed within me; not only would pursuing [Athletics] furnish me with a new Skill and capabilities, but it would also continue to contribute to my burgeoning Body Attribute.

In that contemplative pause, I couldn't help but marvel at the downright exponential rate of progress the System allowed. I felt like I was living with a literal cheat code, and I was more than ready to exploit it to its fullest extent.

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Half an hour later, when the alarm in my cerebral interface rang, I was drenched in sweat. I still felt fairly alright, having kept to my “don't work to exhaustion” rule. The latter half of the exercises had been a bit more light as a result, but that was preferable than to lose out on getting to unlock my [Athletics] Skill.

With the first part of the exercises for the day complete, I quickly pulled up the notifications on my way to the apartment's door.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 400xp.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 300xp.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 200xp.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 100xp.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 0xp.

A grin stretched across my face involuntarily, spurred by the satisfying data I gleaned from the results of my morning exertions.

'*So, a half-hour workout at this intensity rakes in about 500 XP, not even considering the Bonus XP. Crunching the numbers, Level 2 to Level 3 would require a total of 2,000 XP.*

Sans Bonus XP, I'm looking at approximately four days. But if I throw that sweet Bonus XP into the mix, Body Level 3 could be mine by this time tomorrow! And that's without factoring in any XP I'd rake in from grinding [Athletics] or from my time at Mr. Shori's stall,' I mused, an electric thrill of anticipation tingling through me.

I also took a moment to appreciate the absence of superfluous Skills like [Push-Up], [Sit-Up], or [Squatting].

As much as I was keen on collecting various Skills, I was relieved to discover that not every physical action warranted its own specialised Skill. The constant bombardment of experience notifications for every minor action would undoubtedly become overwhelming, cluttering my focus and complicating my day-to-day activities.

Furthermore, I couldn't ignore my long standing habit of attempting to min/max my build in virtually every game I'd ever played. If this System were to inundate me with an overwhelming variety of Skills, I knew I'd be powerless to resist the urge to max them all out.

That endeavour could syphon off months or even years of focused effort, depending on the amount of Skills I were to unearth, and that's operating under the assumption that these Skills even had a max level in this unfamiliar world. My experience with Neon Dragons taught me that hard caps were generally not a thing, further fueling the potential for a never-ending grind.

Exiting the apartment and listening to the unmistakable beep of the biometric scanner locking the door behind me, I surveyed the expansive hallway before me. It was an odd feeling, considering the notion of running laps indoors—something that would have been absurd in the more confined structures of my past life.

Here, in this colossal mega-building, the corridors stretched seemingly without end, a vast expanse of identical doors and sterile walls. The rarity of encountering the same door twice substantially diminished the likelihood of drawing undue attention or annoying anyone with my exercise routine.

At the moment, the hallway was its typical self—mostly deserted. The few people who were around moved with purpose, their eyes fixed straight ahead, uninterested in what anyone else was doing.

All in all, it felt like a quiet, albeit somewhat impersonal, backdrop to my upcoming [Athletics] grind. One that I was thoroughly looking forward to.

Kicking off with a cautious jog—I hadn't moved faster than a clumsy shuffle in this body until now—I felt my muscles and bones subtly readjust. It was as if my body instinctively remembered the biomechanics of running, each step correcting my posture and alignment to prevent any awkward tumbles.

The initial steps may have been a tad graceless, but I rapidly settled into a comfortable rhythm, setting the pace for my first bout of endurance training. And sure enough, the moment I'd been eagerly awaiting didn't keep me in suspense for long.

After just five minutes of leisurely jogging, the System Notifications heralded the arrival of my brand-new Skill.

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

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

'*Let the grind begin,*' I mused quietly to myself with a grin, as I slowly and gradually increased my speed.

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About 40 minutes later, I found myself standing back in front of my apartment door. I had initially estimated that the route I'd chosen would take roughly 30 minutes to complete.

However, my limited familiarity with the mega building and my own pace had thrown that timeline off, causing me to arrive later than anticipated.

Nonetheless, a 10-minute delay was hardly a catastrophe; I was genuinely thrilled to have navigated my way back without getting hopelessly lost.

As the biometric scanner worked its magic to unlock the door, I caught my breath, panting somewhat heavily. The morning's exercises had unquestionably taxed my still-developing stamina.

Yet, the exertion had already started to pay off in a big way—returns on investment that left me buzzing with anticipation for more.

[System]: *600xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.*

[System]: *[Athletics] Skill has reached Level 1.*

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

Unlocking Level 1 in my [Athletics] Skill had prompted yet another infusion of knowledge and muscle memory into my system. This download was far easier to assimilate than the ones for [Cooking] or [Programming] had been, so I'd simply kept jogging while the information settled in.

Almost immediately, the newly-acquired expertise had helped me fine-tune my posture and gait, making me painfully aware of how flawed my initial form had been. While the Skill didn't offer much beyond that, the importance of proper running form couldn't be overstated.

The impact on my stamina was noticeably substantial.

With the corrections my muscle memory had made, thanks to the System's enforced download, I estimated that I could likely extend my jog by another 10 minutes the following day—provided, of course, I started with the same level of stamina I had that morning.

My first dedicated session of grinding left me feeling a wave of satisfaction.

Once I re-entered the apartment, I made a beeline for the shower for a brisk rinse, stripping away the sweat of the morning's exertions.

Afterward, I slipped into the outfit I had worn the day before to Mr. Shori's stall.

The clothes were already steeped in the scent of sizzling oils and the tangy fragrance of algae ramen, making them the practical choice for another day's work without unnecessarily seasoning another set with the aromatic signature of the food stall.

All set, I cast a final glance at Gabriel, ensuring he was still resting comfortably.

Then, I tucked the wheelchair into a discreet corner on my side of the room, next to my bed.

I sent a silent message, essentially a quick note for Gabriel, letting him know I had stepped out for a bit of fresh air within the confines of the mega building, so he wouldn't fret over my absence. The note was clear: He should message me immediately upon waking if he needed anything at all.

Beside his bed, I had laid out a detailed account of the previous day's events, along with Dr. Maltrick's medical instructions. I hoped this would sufficiently brief him on his situation once he awoke.

'That should keep him informed,' I assured myself silently, giving my slumbering brother one last look of sibling care before I turned to leave the apartment once more.

I strode purposefully toward the black double-doors, which I had whimsically dubbed the secret elevator. Punching in the number for the 16th floor, I felt the familiar tingle of anticipation.

I steeled my mind for another round of hustle at the food stall, the gears of my thoughts already turning with the strategies for the best way of grinding out all the Skills and Attributes that I had access to at Mr. Shori's stall.

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As I stepped into the familiar clatter and clang of the back of the stall, Mr. Shori's robust greeting sliced through the din, "Ahh! Stick-girl! Welcome, welcome!"

His eyes twinkled with a blend of mirth and surprise as they appraised my altered form. "Huh? Stick becoming Sera, yes? Food help, yes?"

It was clear that the discerning eyes of the old vendor had not missed the subtle changes the Body upgrade had rendered upon my physique. I couldn't suppress the grin that sprang to my lips as I returned his enthusiasm with a buoyant thumbs-up, an echo of his own characteristic gesture.

"Ha! Good, good! More cut, more cook today," he proclaimed, gesturing towards the familiar stations I had manned the day before.

I was all too ready to dive in, but his next action halted me like a statue. In a shift from his usual lighthearted tone, he addressed me in Japanese, his expression a complex weave of seriousness and bafflement.

"{What exactly did you do to my chopping knife? Did you sharpen it on the block or something? I've never seen a knife as sharp as the one you left at the cutting board yesterday in my entire life}," he inquired, his usual joviality replaced by genuine intrigue.

A jolt of 'oh no' surged through my thoughts—'*Damnit! I knew I had forgotten something important!*'

My mind raced, scrambling for an acceptable explanation. I managed to muster an apologetic tone, hoping my words would smooth over the unintended infraction. I, naturally, replied in Japanese as well. "{Ah... Yes, I'm sorry, Mr. Shori! I've always heard that a dull knife is a kitchen's greatest danger, but I wasn't sure how to determine the blade's sharpness in the first place, so I thought it prudent to sharpen it against the stone I found nearby... just to be safe. I'm truly sorry for altering your knife without asking first, Mr. Shori! I promise it won't happen again!}"

My apology was earnest, tinged with a respect for the craft I had gleaned from my previous existence. I knew well that chefs—particularly those steeped in Asian traditions—held their knives in high esteem, the blades almost an extension of their own dedication and skill.

In my former life, such tools were more than mere utensils; they were cherished partners in the culinary dance.

The initial sharpening had been an experiment of sorts, a curious probe into the capabilities of my newfound Perk. I hadn't anticipated that the resultant edge would be so keen, so dramatically refined that it would be such a massive change.

The stark difference, I had to admit, had even taken me aback, so it was no big surprise that Mr. Shori's keen eyes had immediately spotted the difference as well.

I mentally pledged then, a silent vow to myself: Henceforth, I would exercise caution.

The Perk-sharpened knives, products of my unusual talent, would be kept away from communal spaces—shielded from accidental discovery and the resulting questions that I might not be prepared to answer.

Mr. Shori's response blindsided me, taking a turn I hadn't seen coming.

"{Ah, no need for apologies! Rather, I'm quite impressed. If you can consistently achieve that sharpness, would you mind giving the rest of my knives a similar treatment?}" His voice held genuine admiration and curiosity. "{Decades of honing my knives, and yet, I've never achieved such precision. Never even gotten close to it. How did you master this skill to such a degree at your young age?!}"

I hesitated for a moment, gathering my thoughts. My previous scramble for an excuse had put me on more solid footing for this follow-up. "{Well, when I was younger, I stumbled upon this shard on the streets. Without knowing any better, I plugged it in and... there was a program inside. It helped me gain this skill.}"

I added, attempting to infuse some levity into the conversation, "{Ah! I, of course, now know that I should never, ever plug in random data-shards from the ground!}"

And in some twisted way, it wasn't entirely untrue either—a mysterious, strange program had indeed granted me this unique Perk. Take that, G.E.M.A. System!

With a nod that seemed to close the chapter on our linguistic detour, Mr. Shori motioned me back towards the cutting board designated for algae preparation. Yet, before I could set into motion, he interjected with a grin wide enough to swallow his eyes, a telltale sign of his cheerful disposition, "Stick girl, very good. When done, take knives. All. Make sharp, yes?"

I felt extremely glad that I hadn't been admonished and hadn't been found out because of this faux-pas. I was not only off the hook for my unintended knife modification but had inadvertently impressed him as well.

With an eager nod, mirroring his own and that felt as light as the atmosphere in the stall, I assured him of my compliance and made my way to my station, ready to tackle the day's algae-cutting tasks with renewed vigour.

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A mountain of algae cutting later, I was busy transferring them into their respective boiling pots.

Yes, cauldrons plural, as today's culinary endeavours had expanded to include a second pot.

Perhaps Mr. Shori had foreseen the benefits of an additional pair of hands, aiming to amplify the output of his renowned delicacies. Or maybe it was a precautionary tactic to prevent a repeat of yesterday's minor mishap—the pot completely overflowing. His true motives were as obscure as the steam rising in whimsical swirls above the pots.

The repetitive motion of slicing through the algae for a solid half-hour stint had unwittingly become a fruitful exercise for my Skills and Attributes, generously contributing to my arsenal.

Each slice seemed to deposit a coin into my bank of abilities, and I could feel the weight of my digital pockets jingle with the promise of improvement. The progress was palpable, and it settled a contented smile on my face, one that would likely persist throughout the bustling hours ahead at the stall.

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

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

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

[System]: *300xp gained for Tech Attribute.*

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

Surprisingly, [Cooking] proved to be an enigmatic Skill, one that had a counterintuitively slow rate of experience gain. Unless one delved into its more arcane mechanics—like experimenting with novel recipes or tasting unfamiliar ingredients—grinding away at routine tasks often yielded more experience towards its governing Attributes than the Skill itself.

This unique dynamic meant that my Tech Attribute experienced a sizable uptick, while [Cooking] received only a modest nudge in progression. But rather than feeling discontented, this was exactly *why* [Cooking] as a Skill had held such an allure for me. It provided an

avenue to effortlessly boost my Tech without the burden of squandering exorbitant credits on procuring supplies.

The lively rhythm of a song emanating from Mr. Shori's radio filled the air, and I found myself harmonising with it—a subdued, cheerful whistle that accompanied my task.

I systematically funnelled the sliced algae into the bubbling pots, going back and forth until they neared capacity and my reserves of chopped algae dwindled to nothing.

Revisiting my seasoning routine from the previous day, I meticulously flavoured the simmering water within the pots. With each dash and sprinkle, I intermittently sampled the broth, ensuring the taste was spot-on.

I was resolute not to give Mr. Shori even a hint of regret for bringing me on board.

Once satisfied, my gaze settled on the grindstone nestled adjacent to the cutting board—an old-school, flat and black stone that, much to my story's earlier assistance, had apparently been there the prior day but escaped my notice.

I began gathering the knives scattered about, all the while ensuring Mr. Shori was engrossed with customers. Then, with an air of artful mastery, I feigned sharpening the blades on the stone, employing deliberate, graceful strokes as if I was a seasoned blade-smith, carefully observing the edge while slowly moving the blade across the stone.

To be more real: I was clearly bullshitting.

The intent was to deflect any random onlookers from deducing my uncanny ability to instantly hone a blade to such an extent that it could seamlessly cleave through bone. I made sure to only use the Perk's ability once I had spent at least ten minutes on this act, just to make absolutely certain nobody could discern anything from a distance.

I was keenly aware of the fact that, should this unique skill become public knowledge, I'd likely find myself trapped in some corporate laboratory quicker than I could whet a knife in the first place.

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An hour swept by, and with it, the task of 'sharpening' every knife Mr. Shori had entrusted to me was ostensibly finished.

The blades, each reflecting the stall's ambient light with a deceptive edge, were arrayed in a meticulous sequence beside the unassuming, black grindstone.

I took a moment to appreciate the orderly spectacle—my handiwork, albeit a facade, still offered a tangible sense of accomplishment.

'*Great work, Sera,*' echoed a self-congratulatory thought, a silent nod to the charade I had managed to uphold. Yet, the inner disciplinarian in me wasted no time. '*Now, back to the Skill grind!*' I chided myself, the mental kick redirecting my focus to the tasks that lay ahead.

I genuinely hadn't a clue about the specifics of the tasks that awaited me.

For the next several hours, my strategy was simple: Heed Mr. Shori's directives until either he gave me leave, the stall shuttered for the evening, or sheer exhaustion dictated my pause.

Steeling myself, I seized a quiet interlude when Mr. Shori was momentarily free from the ebb and flow of patrons. Approaching him, I inquired, "Mr. Shori, I've completed all the assignments you outlined for me today. Anything else you want me to take care of?"

Mr. Shori's response caught me off-guard.

With a gravitas I had not seen in him before, he beckoned me to the secluded back of the stall, away from prying eyes and the perpetual chatter of customers. His usually bright expression had given way to a solemnity that seemed out of place on his normally stoic, yet jovial features.

"{Stick-girl}," he began, his words deliberately measured and in fluent Japanese, which made me immediately perk up even further—Mr. Shori never used Japanese if he could avoid it, after all. "{There is one task, of a particular importance, that I wish to entrust to you}."

He paused, as if weighing the weight of his next words. "{But let me be clear}," he continued, his gaze locking onto mine, "{you are at full liberty to decline. I will not hold it against you, nor will my opinion of you diminish and you are free to continue working here as before. Nothing will change, I promise}."

I stood there, intrigued and a tad wary.

This wasn't the straightforward, stoic but secretly kind-hearted and cheerful stall owner I'd known.

This Mr. Shori had depths I hadn't glimpsed before.

I wanted to continue to steer clear of trouble, at least until I could bolster my Skills and Attributes enough to face it head-on, but Mr. Shori's understanding of my current physical capabilities—even mockingly referring to me as 'Stick-girl'—reassured me.

Surely, he wouldn't set me up against insurmountable odds.

The back-and-forth that followed inside of me was terse. His offer was a gamble, a mystery task with stakes hidden from my view.

But curiosity, that treacherous whisper, nudged me forward.

I decided, after a moment's hesitation, that I would at least hear what he had to propose. After all, Mr. Shori had always been fair, and his earnest assurance that refusal was an option without consequence was oddly comforting.

"{Alright, Mr. Shori}," I replied with cautious curiosity. "{I'll listen to what you want me to do. What is this important task all about...?}"