

Chapter 137 - Downloads, Downloads, Downloads

Returning to the apartment felt weirdly nostalgic.

'I literally left like... three hours ago. How is this already giving "homecoming" vibes?' I thought, cracking a small smile as I keyed the door shut behind me.

To be fair, a lot had changed in those few hours.

I was now officially part of the OPN. An actual Operator.

I had contacts—Cryo, Pina, and Mouse—though I still owed the latter a Blip of [Venombite] at some point.

More importantly, however, I had access. Freedom. To jobs, to Fixers, to opportunities beyond the walls of Delta. To choice as a whole.

Sure, I technically could've left before—but back then, there hadn't really been a *reason* to.

No leads. No momentum. No Creds.

Just raw risk.

But now? I could hit up the Task board, chase down work through a Fixer, or even walk into the Valedictorian and see who needed a job done. No more waiting for life to simply *happen* to me as I tried my best to work my stats up.

That rush of potential freedom hit. And it hit *hard*.

"Also helps that the air doesn't taste like spicy smog and burnt synth-oil in here," I muttered, already halfway out of my clothes on the way to the shower. Sweat, dried blood, and enough nervous adrenaline to bottle—none of that was going to go over well with the family.

Especially not Valeria.

"Haaa..." I let out a long breath as the hot water poured over me.

It figured.

That would've been way too simple.

What should've been the biggest hurdle—a once-in-a-lifetime favor from Vega, a shot at impressing an Operator like Cryo, and fast-tracking into the OPN—ended up being the *easy* part.

I was going to have to face Valeria. *And* ask her for a favor. *And* that favor would involve going directly against her express wishes: Asking for Rina's contact ID, so I could try to dig into the parts of Sera's past life she wanted buried.

“Easy peasy. Not gonna be a big deal at all. Just ask nicely and she’ll comply, right? No reason this should go bad at all,” I muttered to myself, fully aware I was spewing premium-grade bullshit.

My one sliver of hope was Oliver. That he’d help up his end of the bargain and done *something* to prep Valeria for this ask—whatever “preparing her” looked like in his world—and that he’d actually back me up when the time came.

Ideally with words. Possibly with some piece of flak-armor.

But that was a later problem. Right now? I had something else to focus on—my Skills.

‘Alright. Priority one: Get [CQC] and [Contortion] leveled up so I can spend those Perk Points. [Martial Arts] is a Level 4 download, so maybe hold off on that for now... [{Anima Razor}]’s only Level 2, but it’s still Anima-related, and who knows what kind of mental haymaker that’s gonna swing at me when it hits.’

I was finally trying to be a bit smarter about my Skill downloads.

No more cramming five upgrades in a row and wondering why I was almost vomiting in corners from the pain and tripping over my own feet for hours afterward.

Instead, I’d space them out. Let my brain breathe between installs. Maybe, *maybe*, I’d get through the day without having to lie on the floor twitching like a broken Synth.

I pulled up the System Interface, navigated to the Skills menu, and sat down on the shower floor—just in case.

Then, with a deep breath, I accepted the [Contortion] Level 3 download.

The moment I confirmed the download, a rush of pressure surged through my skull—like a balloon inflating behind my eyes—then popped into clarity.

It was like someone had injected a year’s worth of practice directly into my nervous system—hours upon hours of stretching, controlled breathing, pain management, anatomical mapping, and practical drills, all compressed into a few overwhelming seconds of raw data shot right into my brain and muscles.

My joints pulsed with this strange... *awareness*, like they’d just been oiled and re-socketed.

I could feel the difference between overextension and safe range instinctively—no thinking required. My shoulder blades suddenly knew how to flatten properly, my ribcage how to compress just enough to slide between narrow gaps.

I suddenly understood how to dive through a one-foot-wide pipe with arms pressed flat against my sides, chin tucked perfectly to avoid scraping.

The names of poses and transitions flashed across my mind like subtitles to a documentary I hadn’t watched but now *remembered* intimately.

I knew I could now pull off something called a standing drop into a contortion bridge—basically a backbend with a mid-air twist and no visible prep, as I had just learned—and recover from it into a low crawl without losing all of my momentum.

I now also knew how to execute a dynamic elbow thread—twisting both arms behind my back, snaking one through the crook of the other, then popping out of it like a human pretzel mid-roll—which, frankly, I didn't know how useful that was really going to be, like ever.

But it was something I learned.

My breathing patterns had adapted too, however.

Which at first was a bit odd, but became second nature almost immediately.

I now *knew* when to exhale to loosen abdominal tension, when to inhale to brace certain spinal segments during risky transitions, and how to minimize pressure across sensitive joints during long holds.

Even my posture had changed—my spine sat more fluidly upright, hips relaxed but ready to spring into action at every moment. Every joint felt... *unlocked* for a lack of a better word.

Like my muscles had been locked at sixty percent their whole life—tight, stubborn, just barely doing what I asked of them—and someone had finally cut the safety wires.

Everything moved smoother now. Deeper range, less resistance.

Like my joints were finally doing what they'd been *built* to do, not just what I'd forced them to manage against their will.

"Whoa..." I let the breath slip out, stunned at the difference.

'Definitely one of the more instantly noticeable downloads,' I thought, flexing my spine in place with a grin. *'Is this why people always swore by yoga in my old life...? Was **this** what they meant? Should've listened, maybe. This is absolutely nuts.'*

I twisted gently on the wet floor of the shower, testing my limbs.

Even the smallest motions felt... ridiculously fluid and controlled.

Like I could fold myself into a suitcase and still walk it off after.

With just a slight bit of effort, I pushed up into a handstand, palms pressing into the tile, body straight and steady even in the thoroughly cramped space.

Balance didn't even feel like a concern—just instinct. [Elemental Balance] wasn't even helping me out here, as I wasn't in a combat stance.

This was just pure [Contortion] goodness coupled with my [Body] stat of 5, as it definitely carried its weight here too, providing the raw strength to *hold* these poses.

But the flexibility and control? That was all [Contortion 3], and it was both exhilarating *and* a little terrifying alike.

'Didn't even know people were supposed to be able to move like this...'

I slowly dropped myself back down onto the floor, still breathing a lot more calmly and deeply than expected, and flicked open the Perk selection screen.

[Coil Spring] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Cobrastriiiiike! You gain the ability to contort and compress your body in unique ways, significantly enhancing the height and distance of your jumps from a crouched, coiled position.

[Narrow Twist] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Dear god, they're like a fucking slime! You gain the ability to twist and contort your body to slip through the smallest of openings, navigating spaces others would consider utterly impassable.

[Slippery Body] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Nobody can keep you locked down! You gain the ability to wriggle free from nearly any physical restraint or hold actively placed upon you by somebody else.

[Escape Artist] [Requirement: Level 3 [Contortion]]

Houdini would be proud! You gain the ability to escape from most bonds or restraints with ease—only high-tier equipment resists your escape attempts.

I'd done a bit more thinking on the walk back to Delta—and then again on the elevator ride up to the apartment—about which Perks I actually wanted to grab for [Contortion] and [CQC]. I wasn't flying totally blind anymore, at least not like earlier when the lists had first hit me like a brick to the face.

Which, to be fair, was entirely my own fault, in a way. Nothing was really stopping me from checking out all the Perk Trees once I reached Level 1 in a Skill, after all.

But considering how much mental overhead I was already juggling... It wasn't exactly something I wanted to deal with, until it became important enough to worry about.

'[Slippery Body] is probably the first to go, but mostly because it's the one I thought about the most. It sounds cool in theory—evasion, grappling resistance, all that jazz—but in practice? I'll just die slightly more quickly. If a 'Borg gets their hands on me in my current state, I'll still only be one solid squeeze away from becoming a protein smoothie. Grapple-resistance doesn't exactly mean much when your bones snap like twigs and your skin bursts like a waterballoon at the slightest application of cybernetic force... Once I become a bit more durable, it'll be a lot more solid of a pick—probably even the best one in the whole selection. But for now? Definite pass.'

[Coil Spring] got the axe next. The mobility bonus could've been clutch—more verticality, more escape options—but I already had [Wall Runner], and with how well it had worked in Delta so far, adding [Coil Spring] felt like buying two upgrades for the same slot.

Not the most efficient use of my severely limited Perk budget.

[Escape Artist] gave me some pause. It wasn't useless. Just situational.

*'It's nice, but honestly, when am I really ever going to get tied up? My main problems are psychos with blades and murder-cyborgs. Against someone like Valir? Yeah, no... Doesn't matter how good I am at slipping restraints if she just puts a foot through my chest like she did last time. And she hadn't even been **trying** to kill me back then. If we go again, she'll make sure that foot goes straight through my heart and make a blood-splatch out of it.'*

I paused, cupping my chin and mentally circling back on Scavs.

'Still... against low-level Scavs or some back-alley crew? Could come in extremely handy. But I don't want to spend a whole damn Perk slot prepping for niche scenarios like that...'

Ultimately, though, my eyes had landed on a better option.

'[Narrow Twist] makes more sense,' I decided, glancing over its details again in the interface. *'If I can avoid getting caught at all, there's no need to bust out of anything. And being able to slip through tight spaces—vents, security gaps, crawlspace—means more options on any infiltration gig. More chances to disappear. More chances to stay alive.'*

After feeling how much the Level 3 download had just altered my range of movement, I could only imagine what this Perk would add on top.

If it scaled with my newfound flexibility?

Yeah, I was about to be sliding through tight spots like a damn shadow. Or a slime, apparently—that's what the Perk flavor-text had called it, anyway.

With a quick nod—more to back myself up than anything else—I selected [Narrow Twist] as my [Contortion] Perk.

As always, I half-expected something to shift in my body, or a little System jolt, maybe even a weird stretching sensation in my spine or something. But nope.

As usual, the System just slotted the Perk in silently.

No fanfare. No flashing lights. No downloads of any kind.

The only sign it had worked at all was the little "Available Perk Point" icon vanishing from the Interface like it had never existed.

'Alright... One down, one to go,' I mused, already flicking over to the next Skill tab.

[CQC], Level 3 download, staring back at me. Combat training condensed into a neat little punch to the brain. I took a breath, then muttered to myself:

"Here goes nothing."

And I hit Accept.

The download hit like a pressure wave behind my eyes—tight, focused, and just on the edge of pain. Not unbearable, but definitely noticeable. It was a good thing that I had decided to stop after this one for the initial downloads, as I could feel the System-induced migraine knocking at the door immediately.

Then the muscle memory came.

My spine straightened and adjusted from my relaxed [Contortion] stance without me thinking about it. My shoulders pulled back, loose but ready to spring into action, like my hips before.

Every joint seemed to realign from the previous fluid relaxation to optimizing for speed and control. I suddenly felt like I *knew* how to brace for firearm recoil in tight quarters—how to absorb it through my frame and use it to roll straight into the next strike.

My fingers twitched momentarily like they were holding a combat knife in a reverse grip, slipping through tight corridors and stacked bodies.

A flood of motion cues played out through my muscles like a pre-recorded fight reel.

I instantly understood the subtleties of weapon positioning—how to precisely angle my blade during a knife disarm, striking an opponent's wrist with a sharp downward flick and twisting simultaneously to wrench the weapon from their grip, while using their own momentum to drive them to the ground.

Toward the tail-end of the download, an even more refined set of sequences slid into place—stuff you only learned after months of daily drills.

Then came the more advanced stuff, things you'd learn deeper into a full year's worth of Operator-grade training.

Drop-step into a clinch. Pivot the off-hand to intercept a gun barrel before it comes fully up. Slam it into the wall, force it out of the grip, ram the knife into center mass, twist and tear.

No flair. No wasted movement. Just brutal, practiced economy.

Another scenario drilled itself in alongside it: Knife-to-wrist redirection, meant for tight quarters—redirecting an overhead stab with your forearm, trapping the elbow, and driving the attacker into the nearest surface with enough force to daze them, knife forgotten mid-fall.

These weren't flashy moves.

They weren't made for style—they were made for ending a fight before it even properly started. Everything about it screamed *purpose*. Subdue, disarm, disengage. Or finish. *Fast*.

Like what I imagined special ops members would learn in their years of training.

I exhaled slowly, blinking as the flood slowed to a trickle.

'Holy shit... That was a lot.'

And I hadn't even picked the Perk yet.

Pulling up the Perk selection right away, the dull headache inside my head warning me of any further downloads for the time being, I read them over once more.

[No-Space Fighter] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Snake-people can do snakey things... You gain the ability to remove all typical penalties from cramped positioning of all close-combat actions in tight spaces such as, crawlways, ducts, lift shafts or when otherwise similarly impeded.

[Snap Sheathe] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Draw, Sheathe, Repeat. Draw, Sheathe, Repeat... You gain the ability to rapidly sheathe/stow and subsequently redraw your weapons in one fluid motion, as long as your upper-body movement isn't impeded.

[Lethal Flow] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

One down... Two... Three... Ten... You gain the ability to immediately follow up a melee kill with a dash, reposition, roll, or vault action without impacting your stance, stamina or situational awareness.

[Kinetic Battery] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

First you get hit a lot, then you hit 'em with a KABOOM! You gain the ability to store a portion of kinetic energy upon successfully parrying heavy attacks that can be spent to power your next melee attack with explosive force.

[Gun-Kata] [Requirement: Level 3 [CQC]]

Every angle is accounted for. Every bullet has a purpose... You gain the ability to seamlessly transition between strikes and point-blank fire. While within melee range, you can chain firearm discharges directly into melee attacks without delay, even firing from non-standard positions (underarm, off-hand, behind-back, etc.) mid-motion. Enemies struck by a melee hit are momentarily tracked, enabling follow-up shots to auto-correct for movement if fired within one half-second.

The choice for the [CQC] Perk had been a pain in the ass, honestly.

I remembered from my past life how all of them had been fan favorites at one point or another—every build guide, every sweaty min-maxer had at least one of these Perks sitting front and center like it was the holy grail.

Trying to pick just *one* felt like I was being asked to choose a favorite limb.

That said, some had been easier to cut than others.

First to go had been [Gun-Kata]. Not because it sucked or anything—far from it—but mostly because I knew for a fact it showed up in other Trees too. [Pistols] and [Firearms] were a given. It was a genre staple, flashy as hell, and there was no way the System didn't recycle it at least once or twice. I figured I'd rather pick it up later, where it had the potential to synergize better.

The next one to go had been [Kinetic Battery].

'Extremely good. And the idea of being able to punch harder than Jin and make him question his life choices, is honestly extremely tempting... But I don't have the know-how of parrying really powerful people yet. Even Jin's attacks are almost too much for me to handle, and he's definitely still holding back. A real 'Borg'? I'd be turned to liquid if I tried to actually parry anything they throw at me. No, definitely not an option yet. Amazing later on, once Miss K teaches me a bit more about parrying attacks like that and I get some more toughness into my body as a whole—maybe a few durasteel bone replacements for myself or something...'

[Snap Sheathe] had a similar problem.

Looked flashy, sounded cool—quick-switching between knives and gear like some kind of cyber-ninja—but my loadout was practically nonexistent. No arsenal, no tricked-out sheathes, barely even a proper selection of knives.

It just wasn't the time for it.

'Maybe for later as well, once I dump a whole bunch of Creds at Misha's for some serious upgrades....?'

Which left me with two real contenders: [No-Space Fighter] and [Lethal Flow].

And that decision? That one sucked.

*'Both are truly amazing... Not being limited by tight spaces is such an amazing Perk to have. Especially considering I just picked up the slime-body Perk with [Narrow Twist], potentially landing me in even more tight situations than ever before... But [Lethal Flow]... It has that certain **extra** bit of potential...'*

That had ultimately been the thought process I had gone down.

[No-Space Fighter] was the safe, boring and useful option. It was guaranteed to come in handy one way or another, at some point.

[Lethal Flow] on the other hand, was a bit more risky, but still provided a guaranteed level of safety and versatility to my current kit.

*'A bonus action for movement is really, **really** strong... Should give me a brief moment to consider where to go and potentially even drag a body with me, if I'm strong enough, as it specifically doesn't mention that I can't do that in the Perk. Amazing for stealth-kills, which is likely what I'll be focusing on for now, considering my relative lack of brawling prowess...'*

That particular consideration had been what had ultimately clinched the victory for [Lethal Flow] over [No-Space Fighter] in my head.

The sheer fact that there was some more synergy in there, that could help me in dangerous situations.

Where [No-Space Fighter] stopped being useful the second I stepped out of a narrow space, [Lethal Flow] would be guaranteed to go off, any time I killed somebody with my knife.

That could allow me to get out of dodge in an emergency, by getting a kill and immediately dashing away from all other incoming dangers. Something that [No-Space Fighter] couldn't really offer in the same way.

'Or at least that's my rationale, I guess...' I thought with a bit of a lop-sided smirk, before locking it in.

With both Perks locked in and my freshly upgraded Skills still humming under the surface, the System-induced migraine was already coiling at the base of my skull—like a very patient, very pissed-off wasp, just waiting for the right moment to sting.

I figured it was probably smart to not poke that hornet's nest *again*.

So I stepped out of the shower, towel-dried my hair, and pulled on some loose, comfy clothes. Then I flopped face-first onto the couch in the living room like a dying fish.

"I deserve to just... relax for a bit," I muttered into the cushions, a tired grin tugging at my lips.

I really had been sprinting toward this moment like a lunatic—burning through days, skipping sleep, finishing [Venombite] on fumes just to make it in time for today. And now that I was actually here, Operator status locked in, Skills leveled, Perks chosen?

Yeah. It hit me just how *not* relaxed I'd been.

Not since before Valir cracked half my ribs like stale breadsticks.

Not since the Vega favor.

Not since... basically the start of this whole "Sera becoming a real-ass Operator" arc.

I hadn't let myself breathe, let alone sit still without thinking about the next objective or the next download or the next survival-critical Task.

It was long past time I gave myself at least *some* grace.

'I can pick the grind back up after dinner,' I told myself. *'Better to have a clear head when facing Valeria than trying to brute-force progress with a scrambled brain and a half-functioning body.'*

With that decision made, I just let my eyes fall closed and sank into the silence of the empty apartment. I didn't sleep—too alert for that—but I rested.

Let my thoughts drift.

Sometimes thinking about the future. Sometimes just... vibing into the void.

Eventually, after what felt like both five minutes and a small eternity, in reality being a few hours, I sat back up, gave the System a nod, and queued up the last of the day's downloads: [Martial Arts] Level 4, [[Anima Razor]] Level 2, and Edge 5.

I started off with the theoretically most taxing of the three: [Martial Arts].

The moment I confirmed the download, that familiar pulse of heat spread down my spine and into my limbs. My muscles tensed instinctively, bracing for what I already knew was coming.

Level 4 was... *deeper*, in a way.

Where Level 3 had felt like a year of intensive foundation work—stances, basic counters, power generation, breathing, timing—this one picked up right where that left off.

It was still the same language, just with more nuance. Like going from fluency to early poetry.

My shoulders shifted without me consciously thinking about it, rolling into the start of a transition from an open Muay Thai stance to something lower and tighter—half Krav Maga, half Bajiquan.

The download didn't just give me basic forms anymore—it gave me adaptability.

The ability to blend techniques, flow between styles, and recognize, on the fly, what kind of strike someone was about to throw from their foot placement alone, as long as I could recognize the form in the first place.

Deeper parts of concepts like *kinetic redirection* and *destructive entry* slotted into my brain like they'd always been there, further reinforcing the fundamentals that the last download had planted.

I suddenly *understood* how to more effectively exploit micro-movements in an opponent's stance—not just blocking and redirecting, but downright *stealing* their balance, taking their centerline and turning their momentum against them while further reinforcing my own.

The memory of previous training sessions I never actually lived played in flashes—dozens of variations on takedowns, checks, joint locks, and position control drills.

One sequence showed me how to slip into an arm-drag straight into a knee shield pass and hammerfist drop, all from a clinch that wouldn't have lasted more than two seconds.

And then... there was [Elemental Balance].

That Perk added a strange, deeper clarity to everything that I hadn't really expected.

The Tai Chi influence it had already implanted—those calm, spiraling movements and rooted footwork—now met with the practical brutality of these new techniques. Aikido's redirection principles didn't just *make sense* now; they *synced* with my balance control, helping me flow instead of resist. Even the Zen Meditation framework the Perk had provided kicked in subtly, letting me more easily separate thought from reaction.

Yoga principles reemerged too—hip alignment, spinal integrity, control over breath and flexibility—blending seamlessly with what I had just picked up from the [Contortion] download as well.

It all somehow just... fit together.

The System wasn't just handing me disconnected pieces anymore—it was *building* something. A toolkit of sorts. A way of moving and fighting that felt almost... *alien*, yet undoubtedly instinctive as it was burned into my body and mind.

I caught myself breathing harder now, each inhale dragging a little more effort than it should. The download had *definitely* taken its toll—on my body, on my nerves, on whatever part of my brain was responsible for keeping me upright.

'[Martial Arts] really is one of the most brutal Skills to download, huh...?' I thought, wincing as another pulse of memory sent a phantom jolt down my spine. 'God damn. Just a single Level 4 and I feel like my skull's about to crack open. And this isn't even counting, like, stacking it with other stuff. There's gotta be a way to make this suck less in the future... right?'

I sat back and focused on my breathing, cycling through the techniques I'd just picked up.

Deep diaphragmatic pulls from [Contortion] for physical regulation, mixed with the calm, centering exhales from [Martial Arts]—somewhere between meditative breathing and prep for a strike.

It helped. A bit.

Tension eased off in stages, my heartbeat slowing from a borderline sprint to something closer to a brisk jog.

The rattling aftershocks of the download were still there—locks, transitions, armbars, intricate positions that I hadn't even known existed just a few minutes ago—but now they played like background noise, less overwhelming and more... informative.

Eventually, the fog in my head lifted just enough to think straight again.

'Edge and [{Anima Razor}] still to go... Yeah, Attribute first. Always easier to handle than Skills. Less violent, somehow,' I figured, popping open the System interface again.

The dinner with Valeria was fast approaching. And if I wanted to be on my A-game—mentally, emotionally, tactically—then Edge was going to be *damn* important.

So, with a mental tap, I accepted the Edge 5 download.

As expected, it was a lot... gentler.

No sudden rush of images, no jarring muscle memory injections.

Just a slow, subtle shift that spread through me like warm static. I

f Skill downloads were like being slammed in the face with a thousand new lessons all at once, this was more like someone quietly dimming the lights and switching the vibe.

No real flashes of insight or techniques this time, just... presence. Awareness.

A soft recalibration that started at the base of my spine and climbed all the way up to the crown of my head.

For the third time today, my posture shifted—barely noticeable, but there.

Even slouched on the couch, I could feel my body fine-tuning itself, the download meshing with the [Contortion] and [CQC] muscle memory from earlier. Not in a clunky, piecemeal way, either—it was smoother than anything I'd felt so far. Attribute rank-ups just *hit* different. Like the System was adjusting the foundation itself, not just slapping new tools into my hands.

It was like getting a full-body firmware upgrade. No bugs, no crashes—just quiet improvements baked into the operating system that ran *me*.

Edge governed all sorts of sneaky, underhanded Skills—stealth, sleight-of-hand, murderous type stuff—but also a surprising amount of my mental resilience.

It didn't shove brute-force answers in my face like Ego sometimes did.

Edge was subtler. It nudged me. Pointed out options.

Showed me ways out I might've missed if I'd been too loud, too brash, too panicked.

Feeling that framework expand across my mind and body... yeah.

It was grounding. I hadn't expected it to feel *comforting*, but it kind of was, in all honesty.

'And, best of all, it doesn't feel like someone took a crowbar to the inside of my skull, so... massive improvement,' I thought with a wry grin, silently thanking whatever invisible System dev had the sense to make Attribute upgrades a little less painful than the rest.

"Haaa..." I let out a heavy sigh, slumping deeper into the couch as the weight of all those downloads finally started to catch up to me. The upgrades had drained way more energy than I'd expected, leaving me barely recharged for the family dinner I was supposed to survive later.

'But they'll be worth it. I'm sure.' I tried to convince myself of that, even though the certainty didn't quite reach all the way down. In my head, it sounded confident enough—thoroughly self-assured—but the tightness in my chest wasn't buying it.

'Maybe I should've waited until after dinner to push these through. Would've had more energy. Less brain melt. But then again...'

I absolutely loved seeing the numbers go *brrr*. Couldn't help it.

Part of the whole thrill was getting the new toys *now*, feeling the shift in real time. Stats ticking upward, Systems evolving. It scratched an itch in my brain nothing else really could.

"One more to go," I muttered under my breath, dragging my focus back toward the final hurdle: [\[Anima Razor\]](#).

An Anima Skill.

Yeah, that meant *weirdness*, I had learned.

I knew full well what kind of chaos the last Anima download had dumped into my brain, and I had zero illusions that this one would be any gentler. If anything, it was probably gonna be even more unhinged than most of the other downloads today—maybe even all of them.

So, I braced. Took a deep breath. Focused.

'Alright, System. Show me what [{Anima Razor}] is all about...'

And then I hit download.

The moment the download hit, it felt like a cold edge slid into my mind and carved open space inside to fill it.

[{Anima Razor}] didn't hit like the others.

It didn't *burn* like [Martial Arts], and it didn't *layer* over me like [Edge]. It *sliced* its way in—quietly, methodically—biting into my brain like it was honing itself against the whetstone of my very mind.

The first wave of knowledge was all about bladed steel. Weight, balance, edge control.

I suddenly *knew* the difference between a forward-swept karambit and a reverse-grip boot knife—how one flowed best for deflections and arcing cuts, while the other was built for compact, explosive drives into tight angles.

I felt the ghost of movement in my wrist and elbow, subtle muscle memory unlocking the perfect snap transitions between slashing arcs and puncture thrusts.

Training modules I'd never seen but somehow *remembered* unfurled in my thoughts—drills focused on maintaining edge alignment during high-speed rotations, disarming moves against opponents wielding larger weapons that flowed smoothly into my previous [CQC] download as well, and redirection techniques that used your opponent's own momentum against them, further reinforcing the [Martial Arts] download too.

Six months of structured knife and blade work compressed into a few seconds of internal upheaval.

Then came the weirdness... The Anima.

Not all at once.

It never did.

Anima liked to creep. To worm its way in. To whisper.

This time, it whispered of *intention*.

I could feel something settle into my bones—something that *knew* how to listen for ambient flows of energy in a fight, and *respond*. It was faint, but it was there.

Tiny flickers of awareness toward threads I hadn't noticed before, like the residual hum of tension between me and my blade, or the way a cut could feel *wrong* unless it followed the natural rhythm of motion.

There was this weird understanding now—just a sliver—of how bladed combat wasn't just about physics, necessarily. It was about flow, precision, yes, but also about the *emotive* weight behind each strike.

Not just *where* you struck, but *why*.

And then there was the Sigils.

I felt my fingers twitch as the memory of Mr. Shori's movements resurfaced—but sharper now.

Muscle memory flooded in, shaving whole seconds off the painful process of summoning the [Anima Razor] itself. The sigil-casting sequence I'd once stumbled through awkwardly now felt closer to instinct—still not anywhere near *fast*, not yet, but no longer agonizingly slow.

The download even threaded in subtle corrections—micro-adjustments to my breathing, posture, and mental focus during conjuration. Ways to lessen the burn.

To avoid the pain that usually came with it.

To handle the invisible blade like it was more of an *extension* of my will, not some unstable wildcard ready to blow my nervous system apart at a moment's notice.

When it finally settled, I was left with a strange calm. A blade-shaped calm.

It felt like something had *shifted* inside me—some quiet understanding of how to move with purpose, how to cut with meaning, and how to call something impossible into existence without breaking under the strain.

And, most of all: The [Anima Razor] itself felt no longer inherently self-destructive by default.

Somehow I could just tell that the new way of drawing the Sigils wouldn't end up with me cramping my hands up instantaneously and half-ripping the muscles in them every time I tried.

'*Just one more level... Maybe two...*' I thought immediately, excitement bubbling up despite the exhaustion.

The [Anima Razor] was slowly turning from a neat gimmick into something that might actually be usable for me in a real fight.

Not quite yet, but it was clearly getting there...