

## **Chapter 198 - Lazy Morning**

My eyes fluttered open as I awoke the next morning.

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

[System]: *500 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

Instinctively, I took a deep breath, trying to get my bearings—the Rest Function always leaving a bit of an odd disconnect from how quickly it caused me to sleep and wake up, with practically no transition between the two things at all—and I almost *immediately* had to grab the edge of the mattress to keep myself from tipping sideways, because the sheer volume of oxygen that rushed into my lungs nearly knocked me out again.

My head went briefly, alarmingly light, vision tunneling at the edges, before stabilizing back into something resembling functional human consciousness.

I blinked at the ceiling for a moment. Then took another, much more cautious breath.

I felt my ribcage actually expand *all the way* without protest.

*'...Oh. Right. Yeah, that makes sense.'*

Now that the Rest Function had finally had a full cycle to actually heal my injuries properly, my ribs were no longer broadcasting their displeasure with every motion.

My lungs were, for the first time in *days*, capable of operating at 100%, full capacity.

Which apparently meant that breathing in a full lung's worth—really gulping it down the way I normally would have waking up, before my injury—was now *wildly* oversupplying me with oxygen relative to what my body had gotten used to.

A quick few increasingly larger breaths of recalibration and acclimatisation later, I was breathing normally again for the first time since the gig—like a person whose torso wasn't trying to kill her every step and every movement.

*'Probably should've seen that one coming, honestly.'*

It took me a few minutes of just lying there to actually catch up to where I was, time-wise.

Kenzie and I had absolutely *destroyed* yesterday.

After the strangely intimate conversation, after the soft-drinks, after the soul-baring intermission—we'd gone right back into the training and stayed there.

Another solid two hours of work, broken up by a couple more rest breaks and a couple more glasses of that genuinely unforgivable liquid gold Tian had been bringing us at regular intervals, until both of us had collectively decided we'd hit our physical limits and could go no further.

By the time I'd made it back to the elevator, my legs had been protesting *every step*.

Getting from the elevator on my own floor to the apartment had been its own minor odyssey afterwards—my muscles had been *thoroughly* shot, every muscle group in my body filing increasingly desperate complaints about the marathon they'd just been put through.

I had, very vaguely, registered making it through the door, getting changed, and falling face-first onto the bed.

Then I'd hit the Rest Function and turned it all over to the System—which effectively felt like it had happened mere seconds ago.

Yet now—none of it remained. Not a single twinge of muscle soreness *anywhere*. Not the deep ache in my legs from all the demo work, not the burn in my arms from the prolonged [Elemental Balance] precision drilling, not the stiffness across my back from the kick Kenzie had absolutely *clobbered* me with or the hurt ribs and lung from the gig that had gone haywire before.

All of it was simply *gone*, washed clean and made once-again-pristine by the eight-hour cycle the way only the Rest Function could manage.

'Once again, thank you, Rest Function,' I thought, with entirely sincere affection for what was easily the best feature of the entire System, bar none. '*Truly... I missed you so damn much.*'

After a moment, I shook off the last of the residual lying-around energy and turned my attention to the day ahead.

It was, mercifully, one of *those* days again—the rare ones where nothing *specific* was on the schedule.

The next Arkion Dojo session wasn't until tomorrow, there were no gigs active, no important meetings were pending and neither were there any looming social or training commitments trying to stake a claim on my time.

Just an open, unstructured, blessedly empty stretch of hours to do with as I pleased...

Which, given the absolute *mountain* of things I'd been letting pile up in the background lately, meant the day was actually still going to be *full* of things I needed to do.

"Haa... No rest for the damn wicked, eh?" I quietly sighed to myself. "Well... Could be worse. Could be a *lot* worse."

Figuring that there wasn't really any use in lazying around, I pulled up the System Notifications, and started working through what training Kenzie had earned me as a teacher.

[System]: The following **Attributes** have gained experience: Body (+ Bonus XP), Reflex (+ Bonus XP), Intuition, Edge, Ego, Anima (+ Bonus XP)

[System]: The following **Skills** have gained experience: [CQC], [Athletics], [Contortion], [Martial-Arts], [Acrobatics]

[System]: Skill gain *Highlights*:

[System]: 200xp gained for [Athletics] Skill.

[System]: [Athletics] Skill has **reached** Level 5. Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download **available**.

[System]: **ERROR: Knowledge and Muscle-Memory download would exceed current Anima Network's capabilities. Skill Level-Up process disabled until repairs have been completed.**

[System]: Remaining **Bonus XP** Available: 0.

I grimaced as I saw the ERROR pop-up.

*'Damn... Guess one cycle of Rest Function isn't enough to fix the Anima Network. If it even helps the healing process at all...'*

Mr. Shori *had* been pretty clear on this—weeks of recovery, *minimum*.

*'Though, to be fair, he **also** would've said the same thing about my ribs, so... Who actually knows.'*

Either way, it was clear now that a single Rest Function wasn't going to shortcut that timeline no matter how much I wanted it to. I'd just have to hope that, at some point, the System would simply inform me of the Anima Network having fully repaired itself naturally—or, if it didn't do that in a couple of weeks, ask Mr. Shori for that other option he had mentioned.

With those thoughts, I let the Anima Network issue rest for now and instead double-checked the more specific experience drops, curious as to whether there was some kind of mentor bonus for being on the teaching side of things, similar to the ones I always picked up from being tutored *by* Miss K or Kill Joy.

I'd never been on that end of the dynamic before, so this was genuinely new territory worth investigating. I opened the more detailed experience rundown for Body, specifically.

[System]: 600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute.

*'Hmm. Yeah... That **is** a noticeable bump compared to what I'd normally get for a similar amount of training at this stage,'* I noted, mentally sifting through my recent gain averages. *'Body's already Rank 6, so 600xp—even with Bonus XP factored in—is genuinely a serious chunk of progress. Not the kind of number I'd see from a regular session.'*

I tilted my head slightly as I turned the implications over.

*'Maybe I should actually make this a habit, then. Put at least a day or two of Kenzie training into my weekly schedule...?'* A small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. *'Spending time with her is fun anyway. So... Pretty much a clean win-win. No real downside that I can see.'*

I considered it for a few more seconds, looking for the obvious flaw—there usually was one—but couldn't actually find anything to argue against it.

So I mentally filed it under bring up with Kenzie on the next opportunity and moved on to the next thing on my ever-filled agenda.

Which led me to throw open my System Profile to see what was still outstanding and needed dealing with on the System side of things.

[System]: Upgrades *available* for following Attributes: Tech (Rank 4).

[System]: Knowledge and Muscle Memory downloads *available* for following Skills: [Acrobatics] (Level 4), [Deception] (Level 4), [{Anima Razor}] (Level 3).

[System]: Knowledge and Muscle Memory downloads available, but *disabled* due to Anima Network damage, for following Skills: [Athletics] (Level 5), [Quick-Hacks] (Level 5).

Looking at the list, I figured it was high-time to actually start getting these downloads out of the way. As long as my Anima Network didn't protest too loudly about it, anyway.

*'Lowest-Level first, that's the rule,'* I reminded myself, already gravitating toward the obvious starting point. *'[{Anima Razor}] at Level 3. Smallest volumetric load of the bunch—even with the Anima multiplier, it's likely still the least taxing overall. Best place to start poking at the Network's tolerance for today...'*

I shifted into a more comfortable position on the bed, settled my back against the headboard, and took a slow, deliberate breath—one of those nice, full ones I was very much still getting used to having available.

Then I confirmed the [{Anima Razor}] Level 3 download.

Instantly, the cold edge slid into my mind again—same way it always did, that distinct cutting sensation that no other Skill download had ever quite replicated.

Like the System itself was honing something against the whetstone of my brain, biting in clean rather than slamming in like the brutal full-body downloads of [Martial Arts], for example.

The first wave was bladework, as always.

It was deeper now—building directly on top of the foundation Levels 1 and 2 had already laid down, picking up exactly where six months of compressed knife and blade training had previously left off.

Six *more* months of it slammed into place.

Where Level 2 had taught me the *difference* between a forward-swept karambit and a reverse-grip boot knife, Level 3 taught me the *application* of that difference at speed, under pressure, against opponents who were actively trying to keep me from using either correctly.

Counter-grip work flooded in—how to break an opponent's wrist control without losing my own blade. Disarm transitions slotted into my muscle memory alongside the [CQC] foundations I already had, weaving the two into something more integrated than either had been on its own.

Specific drills I'd never run unfurled in my mind in vivid detail—chained slash-and-pivot sequences against multiple opponents, edge-up versus edge-down decision trees for different combat ranges, the precise micro-corrections that turned a clean cut into a *committed* one when the target was actively moving against the blade.

The work expanded beyond just *knives* this time as well—Level 3 finally started threading in the longer blade variants properly—just in time for me getting Takeda's Katana.

Not in the depth a dedicated [Blades] Skill would have provided, of course—just like I wasn't getting the proper [Knives] knowledge either—but definitely more than enough about the foundational logic of how blade length changed absolutely *everything* about timing, range, and threat presentation to finally crystallize it all inside my head.

The way a longer blade required completely different footwork and the reach, while extending your control radius, also *reduced* your ability to recover from committed strikes at the same time.

It also, surprisingly, covered how the katana I'd improvised with in the foyer had been *fundamentally* the wrong tool for what I'd been trying to do with it, and how I'd survived almost entirely on luck and raw Anima output rather than any actual technique.

The download essentially said “*here's how you should have **actually** done that*” in the dispassionate way only System knowledge could—teaching me how I *should* have altered the sigils I had available to me, instead of what I had done—and I winced internally at every individual correction ripping through my muscles.

Then... came the weirdness.

The Anima portion.

This time wasn't about intention—that had been Level 2's lesson, and it had stayed with me, settled into something that I could now feel as a constant low background hum whenever I was working with Anima as a whole.

This new layer was more about... *throttling*, for a lack of better word.

It was, effectively, about modulating output; the difference between feeding the Sigils a trickle of Anima for a precise, surgical cut versus opening the floodgates and getting something like what I had gotten inside the foyer.

It was also about reading what the *situation* needed and providing *exactly* that, rather than just dumping everything I had through the Sigil-channel and hoping the result was useful.

It was the lesson I had, quite frankly, needed desperately *before* the foyer incident had happened—but beggars, once again, could not be choosers.

Finally came the Sigils themselves—the Sigil-casting refined again, quite considerably this time. Where Level 2 had shaved whole seconds off the conjuration process and made the sequence feel closer to instinct, Level 3 sanded the rough edges off of *that* and turned the entire sequence into something I could execute under *significantly* more duress.

And, even more importantly, in far less time. It probably shaved off another third of the entire process, if I would have had to throw out a guess mid-download.

What surprised me the most, however, was that the download even introduced a small handful of *variant* Sigils—minor branches off the main sequence that produced different kinds of cutting edges for the [Anima Razor]: A thinner, faster variant optimized for slashing, a heavier, more sustained variant optimized for pressure cutting and a short-burst variant that could be sustained for less than a second but used *considerably* less Anima—potentially something like I had used in the foyer without knowing.

None of them were anywhere near usable mastery yet.

They were simply present in the Knowledge download—not in the muscle memory portion.

The System was effectively opening them up to me, making them available for me to drill toward, if I wanted to.

Then, right at the tail end of the download—just as the last layer of knowledge was settling into place—I unfortunately started to feel the one thing I was hoping to avoid entirely: A sting.

A low, hot pressure that started somewhere in my forearms and ran up toward my shoulders, the freshly cauterized lines of my Anima Network making themselves known the way an over-stretched muscle did the instant you crossed its limit.

The download completed before the sting got worse, but it left no question about what was happening.

I exhaled slowly, careful not to push the Network any further than I had to, and let myself sit with the new knowledge as it settled.

*'Yeah,' I thought, flexing my fingers experimentally. 'Yeah, that's going to be a problem. One, maybe two more of these at most. Then I'm absolutely done for the morning, minimum. The rest's gotta wait for either right before bed or maybe even tomorrow...'*

The Network was definitely healing, that much was certain now. The Anima Attribute Upgrade from yesterday had left *no* question on whether I could sneak another download in or not, after all.

*'But we're not quite there yet.'*

The [{Anima Razor}] download, however, had been worth the pain.

Of that, I had absolutely zero doubt.

*'That was so much stuff... The variant Sigils are also very, very interesting. I should probably ask Mr. Shori about them, before I start messing around them with though. Better safe than sorry. It's bad enough to fuck up my Anima Network once already from being impatient, no reason to risk that again, if I have options...'*

Now that the Skill was officially Level 3, there was still one extra step left—or two, rather.

I opened the System Interface once more and was greeted by the first Notification I had been expecting.

[System]: 600xp (+300xp Bonus) gained for [{Anima Razor}] Skill.

"There it is," I muttered quietly, smiling at the Notification.

It was the leftover amount of experience from the gig, that had been unable to be poured in, as the Skill had been maxed-out during the whole "System Down" period.

A maintenance downtime bonus, so to speak.

I flipped open the Perks page and navigated towards the selection that [{Anima Razor}] had presented me with for the past few days.

[False Edge] [Level 3 [{Anima Razor}]]

*What the hell is "Invisible Air" even supposed to mean? Air is already invisible!* You gain the ability to project a thin shell around a held blade, turning it invisible. This can be activated and deactivated at will.

[One Good Knife] [Level 3 [{Anima Razor}]]

*It's not hoarding if you only keep the best one.* You gain the ability to designate a single blade as your primary weapon and call it to you from a distance. The blade must physically be able to traverse the distance to reach its destination. This designation persists until you choose a different blade, and only one weapon can hold the attunement at any time.

[Spiritual Draw] [Level 3 [{Anima Razor}]]

*The blade hums... The Sprites answer.* You gain the ability to use the act of drawing or unsheathing a blade as a trigger for Sprite accumulation, building the foundational layer of an [Anima Razor] technique in the same motion, reducing the amount of preparation time required to unleash the technique drastically. This does not reduce the amount of Anima Energy required to use the technique.

[Thermal Inlay] [Level 3 [{Anima Razor}]]

*Is this... a fucking light saber or something?!* You gain the ability to weave Red and Yellow Sprites into any held blade's edge, causing it to retain intense localised heat along the cutting surface without deforming or damaging the weapon itself. Cuts made with a thermally inlaid blade cauterise instantly, and the heat transfers into whatever is struck without dispersing into the surrounding air. The amount of Red and Yellow Sprites that can be woven into the blade is determined by your Anima Attribute.

[Singing Resonance] [Level 3 [{Anima Razor}]]

*The most beautiful of sounds... The singing of the blade.* You gain the ability to instinctively listen to the micro-vibrations of your held blade to get perfect spatial awareness around yourself, even in complete darkness, smoke or other visual impairments. The range of the spatial awareness is determined by the knowledge-level of the Skill.

I cupped my chin and leaned back against the headboard again.

I'd done quite a bit of background thinking on which Perk would suit me best, but this one had genuinely turned out to be a difficult decision—because, frankly, I wanted *every single one of them*. The whole damn list was absolutely *loaded* with stuff that made my inner gamer brain start salivating, and narrowing it down to just one had been its own minor crisis.

The only one I didn't *really* feel was lining up with my current "build," so to speak, was [One Good Knife].

*'But, then again,' I mused, 'a Perk with such an obviously low power level either has some crazy synergy with other Perks somewhere down the line, or has a ludicrously powerful Tier 2 Perk upgrade waiting for it...'*

Which was basically Neon Dragons Buildmaking 101. Underwhelming low-tier Perks practically *always* existed because someone smarter than me had figured out a sick endgame combo and the early version was just the gateway drug.

Which, quite frankly, wasn't something I really had the luxury to be banking on right now.

After almost dying *yet again*—for what was probably the fourth or fifth time since arriving in this world, I'd genuinely lost count at this point—it was more than obvious that I couldn't afford to make a bad pick on such powerful Perks just because some future Perk *might* fix everything for me down the line. If I couldn't actually live long enough to get to that hypothetical future Perk in the first place, then there was no point to any of it.

*'I can always just throw a [General Perk Point] on it later,' I reminded myself, 'whenever I find the other combo pieces. No real loss waiting on that one.'*

The other four Perks, however, were all *genuinely* phenomenal.

Initially, I'd been most attracted by [False Edge], as it played perfectly into the "sleeper" build I had quietly been developing. A relatively short, teenage Operator with no visible weapon was an easy mark to underestimate, after all—half my survival so far had hinged on people not taking me seriously until it was already too late for them.

If I could keep Takeda's katana hidden at all times, even mid-fight, that would have provided a massive amount of uncertainty that any enemy would have to work around. A blade they couldn't see was a blade they couldn't track, couldn't predict, couldn't defend against properly at all.

But I'd ultimately decided against it for one simple reason: I really wasn't doing all that much stealthing so far.

Most of my fights had been *beyond* messy and usually had very little to do with actual swordsmanship—or hadn't even provided the kind of timing where the people out to kill me had been actively dueling me one-on-one in a way where a hidden blade reveal would have created its maximum impact.

While a hidden blade could, of course, still be useful in a messy fight—possibly even better, in terms of just stabbing someone without being seen coming—it lost a lot of its comparative efficacy against the other Perks on the table. No doubt about it.

Which left [Spiritual Draw], [Thermal Inlay], and [Singing Resonance].

[Spiritual Draw] was pretty much out from the start, however, simply because of the fact that it *specifically* required actively using the [Anima Razor] technique—and my damn Anima Network was, for all practical purposes, still dead in the water for anything beyond the lightest possible usage.

I had no idea how long it would truly take to fix back to a state where I could safely commit to channeling Anima with any kind of regularity, so picking this one right now just wasn't in the cards.

Maybe in a month. Maybe two. But definitely *not* today.

[Thermal Inlay], meanwhile, was effectively a free upgrade to a Thermal-type weapon.

Which... that one was honestly *ludicrous* in terms of raw power level.

Thermal was the Tier above Vibro, in terms of Neon Dragons weapon classifications.

That alone made the Perk the equivalent of several thousand Credits in market value—applicable on whatever weapon I wanted to put it on, with the ability to swap freely between them too—and it would *completely* circumvent the need to even find a merchant who carried Thermal-tier weaponry in the first place.

*'I doubt even Misha could get those into the Megabuilding...'* I thought, picturing the Gryplik's likely reaction to being asked. *'And if she could, the price tag would probably make me black out on the spot anyway.'*

Which, ultimately, left [Singing Resonance].

The more I had thought about it, the more it had kept clicking into place against the rest of my kit that I had ended up with so far.

[Elemental Balance], [Vital Sense], [Lethal Flow], [Ambidexterity]—pretty much my entire combat-based Perk roster so far had been *heavily* utility-focused.

[Singing Resonance] slotted right into that lineup like it had been designed to.

Spatial awareness in a fight wasn't just a *nice* thing to have alongside those other Perks—it actively multiplied them.

All four of them benefited, directly or indirectly, from getting more sensory data fed into them at once—except [Ambidexterity], which was actually more of an enabler for [Singing Resonance] itself, as I could simply carry the blade in either hand efficiently.

And, on top of all that—having 360-degree spatial awareness in the middle of an actual fight was, on its own merits, *absolutely invaluable* for staying alive.

Arguably even more so than a thermal-grade weapon would have been.

Which was a wild thing to think, because [Thermal Inlay] was effectively a lightsaber upgrade and *lightsabers were **really** fucking cool*—but cool, ultimately, didn't keep you breathing.

*'It's exactly like the Jedi during Order 66,' I thought, the comparison landing with the slightly grim clarity of someone who'd watched that specific sequence far too many times. 'It doesn't matter how impressive your sword is, or how cleanly it can cut through an enemy in a single swing. If you can't tell that you're being shot in the back from two meters away, you're just a fancy corpse instead of a regular one.'*

And that was exactly what [Singing Resonance] provided.

Whenever I had a blade in hand, it would grant me perfect spatial awareness in a radius around me—should be spherical, if my Neon Dragons knowledge was up-to-speed.

*'Now... I definitely **do** need to invest in some more straight-up power options at some point,' I acknowledged to myself, because pretending otherwise wasn't going to make my offensive output less anemic than it currently was. 'My damage potential is genuinely on the low end across the board. But [Singing Resonance] is honestly just too good to pass up right now. The defensive value alone is worth it... And synergy with the rest of my kit pushes it over the top. I can always pick up more power later on, but, just like with [One Good Blade], I first have to **get** to that "later on" point.'*

With one last double-check on the selection, I locked it in.

[System]: Do you want to spend 1x *[Anima Razor]* Perk Point to acquire [Singing Resonance] Perk? *Y/N*

"Haa..." I sighed heavily, feeling like a massive weight had fallen off of my shoulders.

Then my eyes drifted to Takeda's katana, leaning against the nightstand at the head of my bed, sitting there in a way that I could've sworn was actively smiling sweetly at me.

Downright innocently, even. With a *deeply* suspect enthusiasm.

It definitely wasn't that I simply wanted to just pick up the katana again right now.

Nope. *Not one bit*. Absolutely not on my agenda.

"...But I *should* probably test it. Just to make sure it works the way I think it does..."