

Chapter 7 - Gains and Experimentation

I applied a smaller patch of synthetic spray-bandage to the non-existent gash on my forehead, right where it should've been, before manoeuvring my wheelchair into the living room. It was crucial to have some form of bandage in place when Gabriel returned home, lest my not-so-little secret be revealed.

My agenda for the remainder of the day was clear-cut: Deciphering the workings of the Rest Function and devising ways to exploit it for my advantage!

I wheeled myself into the rundown kitchen that looked like it had not been used for actual cooking a single time in its existence, and selected a kitchen knife from the drawer, its handle nestling comfortably in my grip as I lifted it.

The proper gripping of the knife was unquestionably the result of the [Knives] Skill I had acquired through my Trait. In my past life, I was distinctly clumsy when it came to the precision required to handle any kind of kitchen tool, much less something as dangerous as a knife, without appearing like a novice butcher.

But now, I intuitively knew the correct way to grip the kitchen knife, despite its weight being somewhat burdensome compared to my negligible muscle strength.

'I really have to grind out this Skill as soon as possible. This type of instinctual knowledge is downright addicting, holy shit,' I thought to myself, confidently twirling the knife, secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't fumble and wound myself or drop it.

Once I had indulged my childish inclination to toy with the knife, I took it with me to the old, worn-down couch in the living room—I had a Body Attribute to sharpen.

My strategy was straightforward: Engage in as much physical rehabilitation as possible to accumulate Body XP, then, when fatigue took over, inflict a wound on myself using the knife and activate the Rest Function.

I intended to gradually increase the timer until the injury vanished, to figure out the exact duration of rest necessary for the health-reset and stamina regeneration to kick in. This information was going to be absolutely crucial for the future, without a doubt.

After all, the first rule for any serious gamer is to know the precise parameters of the tools at your disposal!

Gazing at the couch, a lingering sense of apprehension gnawed at my heart, no doubt fueled by the arduous ordeal I'd endured just a day prior. I found it impossible to stifle a weary sigh.

"Haa... I know it's necessary, but man... This is *not* the kind of activity I envisioned myself engaging in when I finally got an apartment in Neo Avalis."

Summoning up the courage to commence my lengthy day of painful and exhausting grinding, I took a deep breath.

'Here goes nothing.'

An exhausting and utterly agonising hour later, I found myself slumped back in my wheelchair, utterly drenched in sweat and heaving for air. My face was a flushed shade of red, dishevelled by exertion, but a triumphant smile broke through the physical fatigue.

Who could possibly stay mad when your system floods you with sweet, sweet bursts of pure, concentrated dopamine, courtesy of XP notifications?

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

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Yes, you read that right. A staggering three-hundred Body XP. Your girl is getting swole!

In all fairness, a chunk of that first notification was probably carry-over XP from my previous day's physical efforts—my absolutely preem display of prowess in front of Gabriel. But who exactly counted, right?

I was tantalisingly close to my first-ever Attribute increase—just 100xp shy of that glorious milestone. To say I was buzzing with anticipation would be a gross understatement. I was barely able to contain myself, but truly, I had completely and utterly exhausted myself to get that last drop of xp.

'Without a significant recovery period, there's no way I can continue with any form of grinding today... Unless?' I thought, a sly grin stretching across my face.

Ah yes, there was a way around this obstacle for me, of course.

It was time to scrutinise the Rest Function and decipher its precise parameters! However, before I initiated the Rest Function, there was an additional task to complete.

I picked up the kitchen knife, its metallic sheen reflecting the room's light, which I had set on the coffee table during my earlier xp grinding session, and positioned it against the soft skin of my left forearm.

*'It's been a while... But, this **is** different. This is **purely** for testing purposes, nothing else,'* I reminded myself, feeling a tremor of anxiety stirring in my chest.

It was peculiar how certain actions that would ordinarily seem almost impossible, like actively going out to hurt yourself, could transform into an almost cathartic experience. The complexities of the human brain were indeed baffling.

With a swift and practised movement, I cut a moderately deep wound into my arm.

My body reacted accordingly, releasing a surge of adrenaline that thrust me into a sharpened state of alertness. This felt unfamiliar; it had been a considerable amount of time since my previous body had responded in such a manner, but I was honestly grateful for it.

'*This is the way it should be,*' I reassured myself, before activating the Rest Function.

I dialled the timer to a conservative 30 minutes and tapped the confirm button.

My eyes sprung open almost instantaneously, disorienting me for a brief second.

'*I don't think I'll ever get used to this utterly surreal, dreamless slumber. It's beyond crazy,*' I contemplated, relishing the fact that this surreal experience was now a part of my everyday life. While surreal, an immediate, dreamless rest available at the mere press of a button, was an absolute game-changer.

I immediately sensed that my stamina hadn't fully regenerated; the fatigue from my earlier rigorous training still lingered. But I was more eager to examine my arm's condition.

After all, what if the healing from the Rest Function wasn't instantaneous after a set period but operated on a quickened, incremental basis?

I scrutinised the cut on my forearm with intense focus, gingerly prodding it, pulling the skin taut, and inspecting the scab that had formed. And, unfortunately, the evidence was as clear as day—nothing significant had changed.

"Damn it. So a 30-minute rest won't cut it, huh?" I muttered to myself, disappointment shading my voice. "Or in this case, un-cut it, I guess."

I'd harboured a sliver of hope that the System would be more lenient, but seeing the reality first-hand dashed those hopes. My fantasy of being an indomitable, untiring powerhouse evaporated as quickly as it had formed.

With that experimental attempt concluded and given my persistent exhaustion and lingering injury, it seemed the next logical step was to extend the timer for another round of testing. I also tucked away a mental reminder to keep tabs on the total rest hours, just in case the System operated on some kind of cumulative metric.

I navigated to the Rest Function within my cerebral interface and adjusted the timer to an hour, then mentally confirmed the change.

My eyes snapped open yet again, momentarily throwing off my bearings.

"Alright, so this is going to be a recurring thing, I guess," I acknowledged to myself, unfazed by the minor disorientation. If this was the price for an unblemished, quick nap that miraculously healed my wounds and fully reinvigorated me?

It was a price I was, naturally, *more* than willing to pay.

This time around, my sudden awakening was also accompanied by a familiar notification.

[System]: *50 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

It seemed that the rested XP worked exactly as it had in the game, as I surmised earlier.

I went on to once again assess my own body and level of exhaustion.

There was a definite improvement in the latter, for sure. When I checked the wound on my arm, I could also swear that it looked slightly less fresh than before, but the difference wasn't as drastic as with the exhaustion.

'Hmm... Either my stamina regenerates faster during a rest, or my overall stamina is just that much lower than my health, so it appears that way, despite regenerating at a similar rate,' I mused, trying to put what I was observing into words that my conscious brain could understand.

The next logical step was a repetitive, albeit crucial, series of experiments, elongating the rest timer in 30-minute increments. Each time, I would assess both my lingering fatigue and the status of my arm's cut. It was a tedious but necessary process, every minute a step closer to understanding this strange new reality I found myself in.

By the time the cumulative rest timer hit the 5-hour mark, it became apparent that my stamina had made a full comeback. I felt as ready to take on a full day of excruciating physical rehab as I did that some morning.

This milestone allowed me to set aside my rest experiments, at least temporarily. My attention refocused on grinding experience for my Body Attribute, and I couldn't suppress the excitement bubbling within me.

'Getting Body to 0 is going to be a massive difference, I bet. I might even be able to leave this wheelchair sometime soon!' I hyped myself up further.

Granted, my hopes were buoyed mostly by a potent cocktail of optimism and wishful thinking—pure, concentrated hopium, if you want.

My only tangible benchmarks were the few Level 1 Skills that I had acquired through my Traits. And while Skills and Attributes were not the same beast, if they served as any indication, even a single extra level could have a profound impact.

Poised with a large portion of hopium coursing through my veins, I got to work.

Around thirty minutes and two painfully slow leg-raises later, I finally saw the much anticipated notification pop up in my interface.

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

[System]: *Body Attribute has reached 0.*

The moment the notification appeared, I felt a near-instantaneous change surge through my physical form. It was as if an invisible force was weaving new strength into the very fibres of my muscles. My atrophied limbs began to fill out, not drastically, but enough for me to notice. A tangible firmness replaced what had been a flaccid lack of tone.

Even my respiratory system seemed rejuvenated. Each inhalation became a bit easier, and each exhalation less laborious. I hadn't even realised how much breathing had been a chore since the accident, but now, it felt... less so. It was as if someone had dialled back the gravity around me just a tad, making every movement that much less taxing.

I sat there in my wheelchair, stunned at the immediacy of the changes.

I had prepared myself mentally for the long-haul, imagining incremental gains over extended periods, or at the very least, a lengthy period of rest before the changes came into effect.

But this? This was nothing short of miraculous. A metamorphosis in real-time, right in front of my very eyes.

As the sensations stabilised, a newfound optimism suffused my consciousness.

My Attribute had gone from the nadir of "fully disabled" to a state that was—while still very much below average—vastly improved. I was by no means ready to take on an obstacle course, but I felt empowered in a way I hadn't thought would be possible for quite some time.

Maybe, just maybe, the wheelchair wouldn't be a permanent fixture in my life. With this new '0' in my Body Attribute, I was no longer a statistic on the wrong end of a bell curve; I was on the chart, alive and improving.

Eagerly, I clenched and unclenched my fists, relishing the simple joy of muscle responding more efficiently to neural command. Every sinew, every tendon, felt like it had undergone some sort of cosmic tune-up.

And as I sat there, letting the magnitude of this moment sink in, I couldn't help but think, *'If this is what just one level up feels like, what sort of unimaginable changes lie ahead?'*

For the first time in a long while, the future seemed not just bearable, but tantalisingly promising.

Fully charged with the newly found power in my legs and the palpable upgrade to my stamina, I threw myself legs-first into continuing my rehabilitation exercises.

I quickly realised however, that my grinding was definitely going to have to evolve. After finishing five leg-raises the same way I had before, I still had not received a single notification.

'Figures. As my physicality improves, so must the actions to receive experience. No cheesing the System, it seems.'

So, I decided to change my setup back to what I had originally tried, all the way back the previous day after I had just returned home—full leg-raises, with no couch to support.

Surprisingly enough, I was actually able to complete a full leg-raise after just ten minutes of struggle. That single Attribute increase had made such a massive difference already!

I continued the new set of exercises and after another two full leg-raises, I got my much awaited notification.

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

As I stared at the notification with a gentle smile of satisfaction gracing my face, I suddenly remembered something else I had to test out.

I immediately went back to the next exercises, but this time keeping a certain part of my brain engaged with thinking about wanting to use my stored up bonus XP.

Half an hour of excruciating work later, which left me heaving for air once again, I got another notification that I immediately scrutinised closely.

[System]: 200xp (+100xp Bonus) gained for Body Attribute. Available Bonus left: 550xp.

'Neat. It works just as I hoped it would! It even shows me the remaining Bonus XP. That's definitely a nice touch. If I recall correctly, this was not actually a feature in the game. Great work, UX Designer for this world!'

Exhausted from my second wind of strenuous exercise, I returned to my earlier line of scientific inquiry. The cut on my arm still needed to vanish, after all.

Opting for more granular results this time, I set the timer for one-hour increments. My cumulative rest was nearing the oft-recommended 6-8 hour sleep window, a metric from my past life that was touted as ideal for human health. It seemed sensible to inspect the results after each added hour.

With a mental nod, I confirmed my timer setting, bracing myself for the now-familiar sensation of immediate disorientation.

As expected, my eyes popped open, leaving me momentarily bewildered in that strange liminal space between states of rest and wakefulness.

'Well, it seems like this brief confusion is a constant companion in this new life,' I mused, a touch of resignation colouring my thoughts. *'But hey, it's fleeting. A mere blip on the radar, especially considering the benefits.'*

[System]: 50 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.

Shifting my focus, I began to scrutinise my body, particularly the lingering cut on my arm, to gauge how much, if at all, it had healed during that hour.

Peering down at my arm, I was stunned to see that the cut had significantly diminished in size. It looked like the sort of wound that had been healing for days, not mere hours. Almost involuntarily, my fingers reached out, gingerly prodding the skin around it.

My touch confirmed that this wasn't some optical illusion—the cut was genuinely smaller, the skin surrounding it less inflamed and the scab itself far less prominent.

Disbelief gripped me as I pressed and tugged lightly on the surrounding skin, half-expecting it to revert to its previous state as if some magician would yell, "Gotcha!"

But there were no theatrics, no reversal to a former condition. The Rest Function had, indeed, accelerated the healing process to an almost fantastical degree.

A familiar chime surprised me, ripping me from my thoughts.

[System]: *[First-Aid] Skill unlocked.*

[System]: *100xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.*

It seemed that my consistent checking of the wound, looking it over and seeing the different stages it had gone through over the course of its healing, had been enough for the System to consider me passingly proficient in [First-Aid]!

Today's grinding and experimentation session was turning out far more profitable than I had ever anticipated.

Returning to my earlier thoughts, still trying to grasp the radical implications of the Rest Function, I thought, *'I can't believe it. It's like some kind of dark magic.'*

It was clearly not just some glorified sleep button; it was practically a magical healing pod condensed into a simple interface option.

With the Rest Function, I was flirting with capabilities that danced on the borders of science fiction, and I couldn't help but be astounded by this straight up cheat-like function.

Excited to see the results of another hour of rest, I immediately confirmed another hour.

My eyes fluttered open once again, leaving me slightly dazed as I immediately began to scrutinise my arm, flicking away the errant notification with a simple thought.

[System]: *50 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

To my utter disbelief, the cut had vanished—completely erased, as if it had never marred my skin in the first place. My fingertips grazed the area, seeking any telltale sign of a scar or even just a faded blemish, but found nothing.

My skin was as immaculate as it had been when I'd awoken that morning, a blank canvas once more.

A giddy, almost disbelieving laugh bubbled up from my throat, my mind whirling with the newfound, almost unthinkable possibilities this brought. The Rest Function wasn't just a novelty; it was a game-changer, a sliver of impossible reality manifested through the G.E.M.A. System.

But just as quickly as euphoria had taken root, a more sombre thought crept in, effectively dousing my exuberance like a bucket of ice water.

'I can't let anyone—especially not Valeria—know about this,' I realised, my heart rate spiking at the thought.

The healing I had just experienced was nothing short of miraculous, defying all conventional understanding of biology or medicine. And in a world where such things were as likely to be weaponized as they were to be celebrated, the risk was too great.

If the wrong people found out about this unprecedented level of healing, I could easily become a lab rat, locked away from the world, my newfound abilities poked and prodded at for eternity.

'I need to make absolutely sure that I do not rest for longer than six hours using the Rest Function, if I have taken some obvious wounds,' I mentally reminded myself, verbally locking the thought into the forefront of my mind.

Despite my renewed efforts, I was still feeling the lingering fatigue from the second wave of exercises; the paltry two hours of rest hadn't fully recharged my batteries. Resolved to push through, I dedicated the rest of my day solely to physical rehabilitation. I was hell-bent on ditching this accursed wheelchair sooner rather than later.

By the time my interface pinged with a message from Gabriel—letting me know he was on his way home from work—I had made strides that could only be described as astonishing. I couldn't resist pulling up my Attribute Information and basking in the evidence of my hard work.

[— Attribute Information: Body 0 — 600 / 700 XP —]

[The measure of a person's constitution and strength. Determines the overall health, stamina and physical brawn. Helps to stave off negative effects of physical ailments.]

I'd burned through a significant chunk of my Bonus XP stash, but the frequent breaks and targeted Rest Functions had allowed me to maintain some semblance of a buffer.

The result? I was a mere 100xp shy of bringing my Body Attribute in line with the other Attributes—a more "normal" level of human functionality!

The idea of simply being able to walk unaided had become a tantalising dream.

It was a basic ability that I had once thoughtlessly taken for granted. Now, it loomed large in my mind as a precious commodity, something likely overlooked not just by me in my former life, but probably by most people, whether in my old world or this new one.

Exercising caution, I opted not to chase the remaining 100xp for my Body Attribute just yet. The sobering thought that had crossed my mind earlier about the implausible healing effects of the Rest Functions served as a cold reminder: Being too much of an outlier could have unforeseen repercussions.

Sure, it would be impossible to keep every peculiarity under wraps—like the inexplicable [Polyglot] Trait or the Skills that somehow endowed me with muscle memory I shouldn't logically possess. Still, discretion seemed like the better part of valour. The more I could keep under wraps, the better.

Imagine if Gabriel walked through the door and found me miraculously up and walking after just one day of physical rehab. Even he, trusting as he was, would begin to harbour suspicions about the strange mechanics at work within me.

So, the game plan was clear: I'd keep my Body Attribute stagnant at 0 for at least the first week, concentrating on other Skills and Attributes that needed improvement. Once I had a more rounded skill set, I would make my calculated move to abandon this wheelchair for good.

The medical prognosis had indicated a 2-3 month timeframe for even considering a life free from wheeled mobility. Pulling it off in a single week would already seem nothing short of miraculous.

But at least that kind of rapid recovery could more easily be attributed to a misdiagnosis, rather than raising eyebrows over how a coma patient was up and walking just a day after regaining consciousness.

Just as I was sliding the kitchen knife into its designated slot, the apartment door creaked open.

Gabriel's trademark orange hair was the first thing I spotted, bobbing into view as he wrestled to get his work boots off in a bizarre hop-dance.

I heard muffled swearing and a grunt of exertion before the rebellious boot finally surrendered, popping off his foot. With a flick of his toe, he sent it sailing toward the door of our room, and proceeded to grapple with the other foot's entrapment.

"Hard day?" I ventured, noting his unusual preoccupation with his footwear as opposed to the more carefree demeanour he'd exhibited the previous day.

Gabriel expelled a heavy sigh as he flung the second boot in the direction of the first. His eyes met mine, and I saw the weariness etched into his expression. "You have no idea, sis. This new position is a fucking nightmare. These fucking blanks keep coming in, asking for items we've never even stocked. DD Shards, of all things! Since when have we ever sold those?!"

The mention of DD Shards instantly caught my attention.

These were specialty items in Neon Dragons, allowing you to plunge into another person's emotions and experiences via a special piece of cerebral interface equipment. Most commonly, they were utilised for porn, of course, but their range was truly vast.

The acronym 'DD' stood for Deep-Dive, aptly capturing the essence of the immersive experience.

In the annals of my memory, I had forgotten these gems, but Gabriel's mention brought a rush of recollection. They were a tech marvel I was eager to sample.

It reminded me of the inspiration the developers drew from Brain Dances in Cyberpunk 2077, another cyberpunk RPG that preceded Neon Dragons by over a decade.

The best part? Certain DD Shards could actually help improve your Skills in the game! A tantalising thought, for sure.

Naturally I was not interested in the porn at all, of course. I was a prim and proper lady!

My mental detour was abruptly cut off by Gabriel's continued venting.

"And get this, they wanted me to 'check the back.' As if there's some magical storeroom that magically holds inventory we've never carried. What fucking planet are these blanks from?!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at his exasperation.

It seemed like a universal truth, transcending time and space: the inexplicable customer belief in a magical "back" where all their unfindable desires could miraculously be located.

Ah, the eternal frustrations of retail...