

## Chapter 78 - Challenge

Kenzie and I eyed each other for a few moments, neither of us wanting to charge into the next bout before the other was ready.

It didn't take long for the both of us to understand that we were both waiting for the other to give any indication that they weren't ready yet, so we once again immediately got to it.

Kenzie tried to close the distance, just as she always did, and I tried my best to keep her out with a series of long-range kicks and punches, primarily aimed at whatever she presented as the closest target or her legs.

Targeting the legs was something that I had done during our sparring sessions as well, although it had never really seemed to pan out in the way that I had hoped: Slowing Kenzie down.

Her legs were simply too powerful for the amount of damage that I could output with my infrequent kicks, to truly put a dent into her ridiculous speed.

That said, it was still my best bet to target them, simply because the rest of her body was a lot harder to hit.

Her upper body movements were erratic and difficult to predict in the fractions of seconds that I had to react to her coming in, but her legs were always guaranteed to be at the same place—she hadn't quite figured out how to levitate quite yet, although judging by her burning desire to improve, it was only a matter of time until she inevitably did find a way.

During our initial probing exchanges, in which I tried to ascertain whether Kenzie would use her new move early on or whether she would try to sneak it in later in our bout, I simultaneously tried to come up with a good timing to use Miss K's recommended move.

*'I need her to swipe at me, to really make this work...'*

The problem with that, however, was that Kenzie was primarily trying to close the gap to apply her claws directly to my *face*, if the last dojo session was anything to go by.

She wasn't particularly trying to throw out any punches or swipes to whittle me down, as she very much knew that the second she managed to get close and I couldn't push her away immediately, she would win—I had no recourse for her claws whatsoever; not when we she wasn't completely out of energy like she had been the last time we tussled on the ground.

*'If she isn't going to do it naturally, then I'll have to bait her into doing so. But how exactly do I bait her into trying to swipe at me more...?'* I thought to myself, as I kicked at her left thigh once more, before dashing back to keep my distance once again.

Miss K's notes had, strangely enough, not listed any sort of direct hints in regard to Kenzie's combat style or how to goad her into doing what I wanted, which seemed like a deliberate choice rather than some form of oversight.

It was most likely a sort of test from our Sensei to make sure that we didn't simply rely on her to give us all the answers, considering that she wouldn't be there to give us direct one-on-one coaching for the rest of our lives with every enemy we might ever face.

While I intellectually understood the reasoning, it still annoyed the hell out of me.

I wasn't exactly a combat guru—this being pretty much the second-ever fight I had ever been in; the first one being the very last dojo session.

In my last life, I had ended up in a few physical altercations as well, but they weren't exactly what you'd call a "fight"—that word, to me, implied that both parties were participating to a reasonable degree. Getting sucker-punched in the back of the head or kicked while I was down wasn't exactly what I'd call a fight.

Quickly dodging sideways and lashing out with another punch aimed at Kenzie's midsection, causing her to veer off-path to avoid getting hit for free and granting me the distance I so very much required when facing her, I threw out those distracting thoughts.

*'You don't have time for reminiscing about the worst times of your past life right now, Sera. Focus on the problem: How do we make use of Miss K's move? There's gotta be a fairly easy way, otherwise, she would have never led with that move in particular, right...?'*

Kenzie seemed to sense my momentary distraction and closed the gap again, forcing me to retreat with a series of quick jabs and feints that sapped more and more of my energy.

That was the worst part of our bouts in my eyes.

No matter how many times I kept Kenzie at bay, I had to use a lot of focus and effort to do so, while she simply continued pushing. I was expending more energy keeping her away than she did getting close, so in a battle of attrition, I was practically bound to lose.

The only reason I could even keep up with her last time around was the fact that I had a Body of 5, which gave me quite a lot more stamina than your average girl my age.

Feeling sweat starting to drip down my forehead as the compounded energy expenditure became more and more problematic, I kept evading and throwing counterattacks. A realisation slowly began to coalesce in my mind.

*'The reason she's going for these all-or-nothing dashes is because I'm not giving her any other choice...!'*

Watching Kenzie intently on our next exchange, I paid extra close attention to the exact distance that I normally retreated to. In the brief lull before Kenzie moved again, I confirmed my suspicion: I was too far away for her to do anything *but* go for a dash-in and try to end it in one big attack.

*'I can see how I got here, since last time we fought I was trying to win, and getting her mad enough to go for the all-or-nothing move allowed me to go for my own before I ran out of energy, giving me a decent chance to come out ahead. But if I want this to be a more calculated back and forth, then I'll have to let her close in slightly more, won't I?'*

With renewed focus and a plan in mind, I started to slowly reduce the distance between us with every exchange, letting Kenzie get closer and closer with every dash that I countered.

It wasn't easy, especially since my instincts screamed at me to keep as much space between us as possible, but I forced myself to stick to the plan. Each time she lunged, I allowed her just a bit more room, keeping her at bay but not pushing her too far back.

Immediately, I could see why I had been hesitant to close the distance at first.

The decreased range gave Kenzie's dashes a lot more power—I didn't have quite as much time to react and keep her at bay. But I also realised that the closer proximity provided me with more countering options in-turn.

Where previously I had to rely on max-range punches and kicks, which lost a lot of their impact due to the extended reach, the reduced distance allowed me to put more force behind each of my counters.

The whole bout suddenly became a lot more intense and brutal.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh rang out repeatedly, and I was panting heavily as my energy reserves began to drop rapidly due to the increased effort needed to keep up with Kenzie's speed at the closer range.

Just when I thought I might have made a mistake by allowing her to get this close, however, I noticed Kenzie starting to slow down a bit. Her movements weren't as quick and precise as before, and a brief flinch crossed her face before she could hide the pain.

*'My kicks are finally starting to work!'* I thought with elation, watching her stumble slightly on her next attempt to get in with her claws.

The added power from the reduced range was letting my Body 5 kicks shine, putting the hurt on Kenzie's powerful legs, which I had been targeting for the past few minutes, kick after kick.

After another two exchanges, Kenzie abruptly stopped charging at me entirely, instead circling me slowly but surely. I almost expected a dialogue to start between us, but we were both too focused on each other's movements to waste any brain power on speaking.

Kenzie began to feint dashes, quickly moving to the left or right and faking charges from various angles she hadn't considered before. But I was locked in and managed to punish her with more painful kicks to the legs every time.

More than once, it seemed like she was going for her newly learned move, but whenever she started to coil up, I quickly dashed in myself and threw a punch or a kick, netting myself a free counter without putting myself at risk.

This newly reduced range proved surprisingly effective for me.

It gave me a lot more options to handle her movements, even though the overall energy expenditure and focus required at this closer range were vastly higher and quickly tiring me out.

As I fended off another one of Kenzie's newly minted ideas—this one involving a low dash that ended with her getting punched in the ribs—I finally got a taste of what I was looking for.

My punch connected with her ribs, and as I jumped back to regain my new preferred distance, one of her claws swiped at me, almost catching me off-guard and tearing into my uniform. At the last moment, I managed to put my arm between her claws and my stomach, pushing her attack away and earning only some minor scratches on my right arm.

Seeing the trace amounts of red liquid on her claws, Kenzie's eyes glinted with mischief—an idea clearly forming in her mind. Before I could fully ready myself, the fox-girl darted forward again.

This time, instead of trying to tackle me to the ground or get close enough to put both claws on me, she twisted out of the way of my countering kick and swiped at me with her left claw.

Eyes wide, scrambling to get a leg or an arm between Kenzie's claws and my more vulnerable parts, I barely managed to defend, earning myself another bloody gash. Just a moment later, Kenzie was already closing in for another swipe.

Having tasted blood and recognized how her claws were actually decently effective at this new range, she threw out swipe after swipe with rabid abandon. My initial plan to use these swipes to commit to my new move was put on the backburner as I struggled to keep her hands off of me without the additional mental overhead of trying to find an opening.

The relentless assault invariably forced me to think on my feet once again.

It was clear that I couldn't just keep defending; I needed to find a way to turn the tide—and quickly. Breathing heavily, I punched away another of Kenzie's swipes before I jumped backwards, trying to buy myself a few precious seconds to think.

Unfortunately, Kenzie seemed to realise my intention.

She immediately went into her crouched, coiled position, readying herself to use her new move, forcing me to dash in again to stop her.

*'Fuck! Why is she so good at this?!*

My breath came hot and heavy, and rivers of sweat dripped off me with every movement as I was forced back into defending against Kenzie's relentless swipes.

My arms and legs were covered in scratches, but so far, I had managed to keep her claws away from my torso and face.

Realising that I was running low on options and energy, I decided to go for an all-or-nothing gamble. It wasn't exactly what Miss K had in mind when she taught me this move, but I simply lacked the experience to figure out how and when to use it effectively.

Kenzie's constant swipes were too fast to defend against while also trying to set up my own moves. I couldn't find any time to think about a way to get out of this situation after putting myself into it.

As Kenzie moved in for the next swipe, I took a deep breath and readied myself for a bout of pain. Instead of punching away her incoming swipe as I usually did, I let her attack sail through.

I saw a mixture of confusion, elation, and terror in Kenzie's face as her claws continued onwards past where I would have normally intercepted them.

Meanwhile, I stepped back as fast as I could, slightly increasing the range between us in the fraction of a second it took for her swipe to connect. And connect it did, her claws colliding with the left side of my rib cage, digging deep into my flesh but just missing any important organs due to the slightly increased distance I had managed to put between us.

Using the momentum of the hit as I suppressed a cry of pain, I twirled on one foot, putting my all into every muscle's movement to emulate Miss K's move from the blue shard as best as possible.

After a full 360-degree turn, my right foot connected with Kenzie's legs.

My aim was completely off, as I had tried to hit her somewhere centre-mass, but it had enough oomph behind it to kick her legs out from under her with a loud crash, sending her spiralling and falling to the ground, her head hitting the mat hard as her arms were still extended from the swipe, unable to stop her fall.

My legs lost all strength as I breathed out heavily in pain and similarly crashed to the floor, the leftover momentum from the pirouette kick unbalancing me enough to lose my footing.

As I lay there, gasping for breath and clutching my injured side, I saw Kenzie groaning and trying to push herself up, a dazed look in her eyes.

"Damn, Sera," she muttered, wincing as she touched the back of her head. "That was one hell of a move. Didn't see that coming at all. Fuck, that hurts!"

"Yeah, well," I replied, still trying to deal with the pain and heavily breathing in through gritted teeth, "neither did I, honestly."

A third voice broke through our groans of pain, "It's always fascinating to watch the two of you. There's a certain level of sophistication that's downright impressive, but then, at the same time, it seems like you're missing some absolute fundamentals to tie everything together, leading to complete nonsense like whatever the fuck that just was."

Kenzie and I both looked up at a broadly grinning Miss K, who had sauntered over at some point. "I gave the both of you some new moves to try out but purposefully didn't include any explanation on how to get to the point where you can reliably use them."

Miss K looked towards Kenzie and elaborated, "For you, I had you rely on your strong legs to really power-dash towards an enemy that's too far away for you to use your claws. But you

quickly realised it doesn't work if the enemy is even slightly closer than what Sera usually kept you at. The enemy can simply dash in themselves and punch you in the mouth for badly timed attempts, as Sera so neatly demonstrated. You'll need to figure out whether you want to commit to the move and back away from the enemy yourself or not rely on it and instead work on other avenues to get ahead. The indecision you demonstrated here would have gotten you killed very quickly in a real fight. If Sera hadn't been nice enough to aim for your legs or centre mass, or heavens forbid, used a knife, you would have been in big trouble."

Turning her attention to me, Miss K's eyes met mine. "And for you, Sera, you had the right *idea* but focused too much on using the new move specifically. While the task was to figure out how to use them in a real fight, concluding with an answer of 'It's hard and I don't know how to get there' is a *completely* viable answer to the task. Risking yourself the way you did at the end there would *never* work against an opponent you aren't as comfortable with as you are with Kenzie. If you had even slightly misjudged anything, her claws would have ripped out your lungs and you'd be dead."

Offering us both a hand, Miss K easily pulled us back up from the ground and gestured toward the first-aid area of the dojo. "Go get yourselves fixed up and rest for half an hour. We still have another half-hour to go once you're back, and I have something fun planned; try to get back up to at least 70%."

With those words, Miss K left and headed over to the other side of the blue-coloured area, where Jin and Tom were sparring. Their match looked a lot more civilised than the one Kenzie and I had just finished, judging by the lack of blood on the ground.

Kenzie limped toward the first-aid area, and I slowly followed by her side, clutching my bleeding left side and shallowly breathing to keep the pain down. We both stayed silent, chewing over Miss K's words.

Finally, as we reached the first-aid station, Kenzie broke the silence. "She's right, you know. I was so frustrated with myself that I didn't know what to do. Being slightly closer together made all of your kicks hurt so fucking much, I can barely stand, even now. If you hadn't held back like that, I would've lost way before I figured out I could use my claws at that range... I'm way too one-dimensional, aren't I?"

There was a definite hint of frustration and self-loathing in her voice, which rubbed me the wrong way, but I could understand where she was coming from all too well.

"I wasn't exactly the paragon of smart decisions either, let's be real. My idea was to get you to swipe at me so I could kick you with that new move, but the moment I actually got you to swipe at me, you simply didn't stop. I had no idea how to get out of that situation at all, even though it was my idea," I answered with a few pained breaths in between each sentence, my injured side sending jolts of sharp pain through my body at regular intervals.

"Like Miss K said, if I didn't know you as well as I did from our last bouts, I would have definitely died trying to get out of that situation with such a risky move... I just couldn't think of any other way to get to use the move."

Kenzie nodded, her face scrunched up in thought. “Yeah, I get it. It’s like we’re both trying to force these new techniques without really knowing when or how to use them. I mean, I’m pretty much just a one-trick pony with my claws too. I need to figure out how to diversify my attacks—like Miss K said last session. I need to use my legs more, but it just feels weird, when I have claws, y’know?”

“I don’t really, no,” I replied with a chuckle, holding up my non-clawed hands. Turning more serious, I added, “But I think I can imagine. It’s like punching someone when you could use a knife instead, right? Way more effective to just cut up somebody than try to blunt-force them to death... But at the end of the day, we’re both here to learn, right?” I said with a small smile.

“We’ll figure it out eventually. Just gotta keep practising and not get too frustrated with ourselves in the process.”

She laughed, a sound that was more wheeze than giggle given her state. “True that. And hey, at least we’re both stubborn as shit. That’s gotta count for something.”

Both of us turned quiet and contemplative afterward, as we started applying various bandages, ointments, and compressions to ourselves.

I helped Kenzie apply a cold compress to her head, and she returned the favour by putting some coagulant onto the open wounds on my left-hand side, which made me nearly pass out from pain.

After we were fixed up as best as we could manage in our current states, we both sat down on the ground, our legs unable to carry us any longer. The dojo was filled with the sounds of other pairs sparring and the occasional barked command from Miss K, but we were in our own little world for the moment.

Kenzie broke the silence again, this time with a more relaxed tone. “You know, despite the pain and everything, I’m really glad we’re doing this. Feels like we’re actually getting somewhere, even if it’s slow.”

I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. “Yeah, same here. It’s tough, but we’re definitely making some sort of progress, I’d like to believe. Plus, it’s kinda fun in a weird, masochistic way.”

She grinned, leaning back on her hands. “Absolutely. Here’s to not dying and kicking some serious ass in the future.”

“Cheers to that,” I replied with a chuckle.

We both sat there, taking a moment to breathe and recuperate before heading back to face whatever Miss K had planned for us in the last thirty minutes of today’s session.

I took a brief moment of respite to check over the gains for today’s session.

I knew I had levelled up at least two Skills during our previous bouts—thankfully, they weren’t nearly as impactful as [Martial Arts] Levels were, otherwise, I would have likely gotten knocked off my feet again.

[System]: 1,100xp gained for [Martial Arts] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 400xp gained for Reflex Attribute.

[System]: 200xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

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

[System]: [Athletics] Skill has reached Level 4.

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

[System]: [Acrobatics] Skill has reached Level 3. Gained one [Acrobatics] Perk Point.

[System]: 300xp gained for [CQC] Skill.

[System]: 200xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.

[System]: 100xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

Seeing the vast array of experience gains sent a warm, fuzzy feeling through my body.

*'Numbers that go brrr are very satisfying, I do have to say,'* I thought to myself with a smile.

The [Athletics] and [Acrobatics] downloads had been surprisingly, and thankfully, tame in comparison to other Skills, mostly dealing with some theoretical knowledge about stamina usage and proper movements. The vast majority of both, however, had been muscle memory that had been seamlessly integrated into my body without much hassle.

It was strange to see how easily the muscle memory for those two Skills was integrated when compared to something like [[Anima Razor](#)].

*'I wonder if it's because I already do a lot of those movements during my daily runs and workouts...? Maybe there's a bit of synergy there between the System's downloads and my own pre-existing muscle memory?'*

Putting those thoughts aside for now, I quickly perused the Perk selection for the [Acrobatics] Skill. I'd have to make a choice on it sooner rather than later, but I also wanted to check whether there was anything new available compared to what I knew the Skill offered in the game.

[Parkour Mastery] (*Acrobatics*)

*Over and Under!* You gain the ability to navigate the environment more fluidly, chaining moves like wall-runs, vaults, and jumps without losing speed. Knowledge and muscle-memory is determined by the knowledge-level of the Skill.

[Roll With It] (*Acrobatics*)

*Are they a fucking goblin or something?!* You gain the ability to reduce stun time and damage dealt after being hit or knocked down by rolling with the impact, allowing you to get back into action faster or avoiding follow-up attacks.

[Aerial Combat] (*Acrobatics*)

*It's like fighting someone on a pogo-stick!* You gain the ability to confer more of your upwards momentum into attacks, drastically enhancing their power if you attack while in mid-air.

[Cat's Grace] (*Acrobatics*)

*Land like a feather, even from great heights!* You gain the ability to expertly manage the



impact of a fall, significantly diminishing the damage incurred from high drops, provided you are agile and able to manoeuvre your body during a portion of the descent and upon immediate impact.

[Air Dodge] (*Acrobatics*)

*Like a cat!* You gain the ability to execute movements in mid-air with vastly enhanced precision, avoiding projectiles or closing distance to an enemy with greater ease.

Silently nodding to myself, I recognized the Perk options from Neon Dragons. I closed the Perk selection for now, figuring I'd make a choice later when I had more time to think it through.

For now, Kenzie and I were being waved over by a dangerously excited-looking Miss K, so we hurried over to join her and the boys.

The thirty minutes of recovery had worked wonders for both of us. We managed to get there without limping or looking like we were in pain, which I considered a major win.

“Good to see you two back on your feet,” Miss K greeted us with a toothy grin. “We’ve got about thirty minutes left in today’s session, so I figured we’d make those really fun.”

Out of nowhere, she produced a syringe filled with a green liquid.

“This is a neat little medication created by Ether Labs called SuVi Max.”

Jin’s eyes widened and Kenzie gasped, cluing me in that this was something special.

I, however, had never heard of it, so I stayed silent and curious.

Miss K’s grin widened as she took in Jin and Kenzie’s reactions. “As some of you seem to know, it’s quite the expensive little stim. For those of you *not* in the know: SuVi Max is one of the high-end products that Ether Labs produces. It’s sold at exorbitant prices, and for good reason. Using it permanently increases a person’s physical conditioning—like a steroid, but with permanent effects and no side effects.”

Now my curiosity was piqued.

A permanent upgrade? Any gamer would jump at the chance for something like that.

It was a no-brainer to want as many of those as possible.

“You can only enjoy a few of these over your lifetime, no matter how many Credits you have,” Miss K continued, her tone turning a bit colder. “The medication will straight up kill you if you take more than one every five years. So, don’t go asking your benefactors to get you a truckload of them.”

Her chuckle had an edge to it, suggesting she was speaking from experience rather than a mere hypothetical.

“Now, I’m not just showing you this to rub it in your face, no, no. This little beauty will be the reward for our last thirty minutes here. The rules are simple: You will all fight me together, and whoever manages to land a hit gets the SuVi Max. No strings attached.”

With that, the injector disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Miss K spread her arms wide, inviting an attack and we all stood around her in a circle, utterly dumbfounded by her abrupt challenge.

*‘What...? Fight her...?’*

The four of us exchanged uncertain glances, not sure how to react.

We couldn’t exactly go and fight our teacher, right? But then again, she *was* a Grandmaster, so the chances of us hurting her were practically zero.

Still, the idea of fighting the person teaching us how to fight felt backwards and problematic.

My eyes met Kenzie’s, and I saw my own questions reflected in hers.

Meeting her gaze, however, seemed to spark something in both of us; something our earlier talks had sowed the seeds for—a desire to improve. We ever-so-gently nodded to each other in a tacit understanding: We would give it our all, no matter what.

Without a word, Kenzie and I immediately dashed at Miss K in the next moment, who stood in the centre of the half-circle we had created around her.

We aimed to land a hit and earn ourselves a permanent upgrade...